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C L A U D E .

VOL. III.



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BY

L A D Y B L A K E,

AUTHOR OF

"HELEN'S FIRST LOVE,"

"THE HAMMONDS OF HOLYCROSS,"

&c. &c.



LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1870.

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250. g. 151.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL,
BLENHEIM HOUSE.

C L A U D E .

CHAPTER I.

I WAS down stairs early the next morning, for I had heard Claude say he should be off before any of us were stirring, and that he should breakfast alone, telling his mother she was not to expect him before she saw him, he could not tell her what day he might be at home to dinner. I was therefore bent on seeing him that morning, and when I came down found him seated at breakfast. He looked up a little surprised, but with a good-natured smile on his handsome face, he said,

“ Who would have thought of seeing you by candle-light this dark morning, Minnie; come

and sit down, and help me to finish my breakfast. I am off in a few minutes."

"What makes you so early, Claude dear, this morning?"

"Press of business, Minnie; I have loads of things to do to-day. This is my settling morning, and I have to be at John Forest's house by ten o'clock."

"Do you like him any better, Claude?"

"Does he like *me* any better, you mean, for that I think is the real state of the question. I should not object to *him*, if he did not object to *me*, and try perversely to thwart me in every direction, because he is jealous of Mr. Crofton's preference; but never mind, he is not worth talking about. I say as little as I can, to him, and keep things as smooth as I can, on Mr. Crofton's account. I expect he will be unpleasant this morning, because he will have to pay over a lot of money to me, and I shall have to pay it into the bank as I go through Thorpe to the Deanery. He wishes to do that part of the business instead of *me*, so it always makes

him savage, and he makes such a fuss about my receipt—but I will not quarrel with the man, and, as I have just now said, do not wish to talk about him.”

“No, we will not waste our time, as it is so short, and I want you to tell me about your visit to the Deanery; are you going to stay there many days?”

“Two, or it may be three, Minnie; and I can tell you more when I come back, though I suspect there will be nothing out of the way to relate then.”

“Someone there will be very pleased to see you, Claude,” I said in a low voice.

My brother started as I said this, and a deep colour flushed his usually pale complexion; he looked at me earnestly and said nothing.

“Yes, Carrie Elton will! I saw as much when I met her last at the Hall, and saw her with you.”

“Oh! Carrie!” said Claude, the bright hue dying away. “Yes, I daresay Carrie will have a kind little welcome for me, and so will her sisters.”

"I hope you will have a pleasant time," I next remarked, as I watched Claude finishing his meal. He only replied,

"Much as usual, I suppose." And then, as he got up, and having drawn on his gloves that raw winter morning, he stooped down to kiss me, I could not resist an impulse which urged me to say,

"Take care of yourself, dear Claude."

"Why, in what way? I have done so with pretty good success these three and twenty years, so I think now I may be trusted to go alone. But what is the particular danger you apprehend for me? That I shall be waylaid on my road to Thorpe with all Mr. Crofton's rents in my pocket?"

"No, I was not thinking of outward and visible assailants, only—don't be angry, dear—only for fear you might be made unhappy yourself, or unknowingly cause unhappiness to others."

"Nonsense! You are a dear good little Minnie, but you must not trouble yourself about

me; rest satisfied I know what I am about, and am quite competent to do what you tell me—take care of myself. Now let me go, there's a dear. It is too cold for you to stand here, so good-bye."

We were then at the hall door, where I had gone with Claude, and was standing by him in the misty light of the early November morning. Early, however, as it was, the post that morning was as early, for we saw the man who walked over daily from the nearest post town to our district coming up to the house, with his peculiar long swinging step—half walk half run. Claude just stopped to hear if there were any letters for him, and finding there were none he walked on, whilst I remained to receive mine. Whilst the postman leisurely searched his bag, and I quietly waited for what might be forthcoming, my eyes followed Claude as he pursued his way with light elastic step over the tangled path that led the nearest way to the Hall, and across a wild open piece of ground that was visible for nearly a mile from the elevated posi-

tion on which I stood at the hall door. I watched his active graceful figure till it was lost in the distance, with a strange feeling of yearning affection that I could hardly account for at the time; and when he was no longer visible, I felt oppressed with a sense of desolation that almost prompted me to run after him, and beg him to return to his home. I was, however, so fully conscious of the absurdity of following such an impulse, that to divert my thoughts I turned quickly to see if any letters had been discovered addressed to me, and had the extreme satisfaction of receiving two. One a foreign letter from Lady Manwairing and the other from her brother, Keene Crofton. I kept the latter in my hand whilst I read Mary's. It was a charming letter, very like the person who wrote it. It told me everything I wished to hear, and how her husband's health had begun to improve since they had taken up their winter quarters near Cairo. She even spoke hopefully of Sir Edward's being able to spend the next winter in England, or at least nearer home.

And then came many an anxious inquiry respecting Flora and her betrothed. I saw that Mary's heart was yearning to be with her at that important crisis of her life.

It was evident that Mary thought I had been much more with Flora since she had left England than had been the case. She did not seem to entertain the slightest suspicion of the possibility of an attachment between her brother and myself. I might have been another sister by the way she wrote of him to me, and of all that concerned him. The letter said,

“ You who are so constantly seeing my darling can but tell me how she gets on without her old aunt at this time—how she and her father spend their days in Lord Ramsay's absence. I trust this little interval will bring the father and his child more intimately together than has yet been the case. I often feel as if I had been very selfish in deserting my post till my child had been fairly given away to another, but then I look at my husband, and feel as if there had been sufficient cause. I am de-

lighted to hear Lady Percival is to be so soon with Flora. I have not heard very lately. Neither she nor Keene are very constant correspondents, but now I am settled at last I look for more frequent tidings of all the dear ones at home, amongst whom I place in a foremost position my old friend Marian. Write soon and tell me all about everything—everything, however trivial, is interesting at this distance—and tell me, above all, whether Keene seems disposed to visit us after the wedding is over. He talked of it before I left him, but has been strangely silent on the subject ever since. Still I live in hopes of seeing him in the course of a few weeks. I wish he could *chaperon* you, Marian, but I suppose '*les bien seances*' would not allow that, even if you were disposed to give me so great a pleasure. And now I think I must say good-bye."

After duly considering that letter, with my thoughts a good deal engrossed by what my other might contain, I began slowly (prolonging my happiness as it were) to unfold the

other. It was the first I had had from Mr. Crofton since our engagement. I can recall even now the delicious thrill of expectant happiness with which I looked first to the end of this precious letter to see how he signed himself; but it was only a short and simple "Yours ever, Keene Crofton." I do not know exactly what I expected, but perhaps that fell a little short of it, and as there was nothing to dwell upon, I turned hastily to the other side, upon which I found the accustomed "Dear" lengthened into "Dearest Marian."

It was a very quiet letter, but affectionate enough for me, who knew him so well. It made me very happy, for there was an underlying tone of tenderness which quite satisfied my heart. He spoke of returning home in the course of a couple of days, and said that the following week he expected Lord Ramsay, and Lady Percival had promised to come with him, and the wedding was now settled to take place early the following week.

"And after all the turmoil of that event is

happily over, I shall have a little quiet breathing time, wherein I may see something more of you, my darling, than I have done of late, and we may look forward to the beginning of ‘a happy new year’ for both. You know how sensitively I have long avoided the expression of that sentiment, and even fled from the friends who might have so greeted me. Well, there is a marvellous change come over my spirit in that and many another respect. I shall expect you, my Marian, not only to *wish* me, but to *give* me a happy new year. We will talk the matter over as soon as things will permit. I shall trust to see you, darling, soon after I get back. Till then, yours ever, &c.”

Then I saw there was a little postscript written as an afterthought across the end of my letter, and it said,

“I open my letter to tell you I have just heard from Mary. All seems well with them. I have been making a little plan, which I hope to realize after a certain event, and that is to take you to visit her before we settle down

quietly at home. Do you like the idea? You will tell me when we meet."

What a strange question to ask, I thought, as my eyes lingered long on every word of this most precious letter. Did I *like* the idea of going with *him* to visit the dearest friend I had on earth? Did I wish to enter Paradise? He might as well question that, or any other dream of rapture almost beyond the power of my feeble imagination to form. Oh! what a future lay before me, dimly shaping itself out in the visions of coming happiness suggested by every line of the letter that lay within my hand. And then, with the exceeding joy, there came a tone of almost mournful apprehension into my mind, suggesting what had I ever done to deserve such felicity as was now presented to me? Was not the anticipation even too bright, too beautiful ever to be fully realized? Could Mr. Crofton actually prefer me to all the world? —and was I really destined to be the chosen and beloved companion of all his future life and he of mine? I do not think I really doubted it,

but the very uncertainty of all human bliss, however intense, must give a tinge of sadness to the happiest anticipations, and in my case it was little wonder that I marvelled and rejoiced in trembling, when I contemplated the bright future that lay before me.

It was well that I felt so strong in my inner consciousness of a joy that none could either meddle with or interrupt, or my serenity might have suffered severely that same morning.

Mrs. Markham appeared with a very clouded countenance at the breakfast table, and when one of those not very unusual moods possessed her, the results were by no means pleasant to those about her. In the present case, Miss Alethea being out of the reach of annoyance, as mentally invulnerable to all her sister's attacks, and neither of her children being present (Juliet having gone out early), the brunt of her discomfort fell on me, as nearest at hand to endure it. Nothing could please her that morning—the tea had to be re-made, whilst Miss Ramsay cheerfully sipped her

coffee, casually remarking on the wastefulness of her sister's proceeding, and recommending her to follow her example. Mrs. Markham eagerly seized upon one of Miss Alethea's words, as if she had found a little vent for some of the cause of her ill-humour.

"Wasteful indeed! I think I may venture to order a little fresh tea in my own house, when Marian has entirely spoilt what she has made, putting in such quantities of green, and letting it stand till it is as bitter as gall! But as to waste or extravagance, no one on earth hates it as much as I do! I am sure I have given up every luxury and indulgence to which I have been accustomed, as well as the pleasure of seeing my chosen friends here, and now I find I am to have people coming here, and quartering themselves upon me, without any invitation, and such people too, there will be waste and extravagance enough in the house then!"

Miss Ramsay's sympathy and attention were speedily aroused at that announcement, and

she looked up from her savoury repast of poached eggs and broiled ham to inquire further into her sister's meaning, saying,

“Can't you say who is coming, or wants to come, Charlotte, and make an excuse if you don't like to have them. I am sure I would.”

“I daresay you would. But here is a letter from Charles, or rather his disagreeable wife, proposing to come to me for Ramsay's wedding, so how can I put them off? If you can tell me, I shall be very glad to do it.”

“Oh! Charles and Emily coming! Well, that is but natural on such an occasion; and really I did not find her so bad when I saw a good deal of her in London; and, after all, they have never offered to come here before.”

“No, because there was nothing worth coming for,” returned Mrs. Markham, indignantly; adding, “and I don't choose my house to be resorted to just when it suits peoples' convenience.”

“Oh! never mind; if people make a convenience of me, I should make one of them in return.”

"I do not see how that applies to this case," said my step-mother, sullenly stirring her tea.

"Don't you, Charlotte? Well, I will tell you how. Would not it be a good thing next spring for you to go and stay with Charles in town, and take Juliet with you, to see a little life and amusement there?"

"Humph! even if I were disposed to go, Juliet would not."

"No, I know better than that—she must go, if you and I went away; and I should not mind going myself."

"I daresay not; but there is Marian—what should we do with her?" said Mrs. Markham, looking discontentedly in my direction.

It was pleasant then to feel so far out of the reach of any of those petty little annoyances which formerly would have distressed me much. My inward fund of happiness enabled me to meet even this demand with composure and even cheerfulness, and say,

"Oh! do not think about me. I would not be any bar to your plans. I have no doubt I

can take care of myself, or find some one to do it for me."

"It is all very well talking in that rambling way about taking care of yourself, but I should not like to leave you alone here ; people might think it odd, and I never like to do out-of-the-way things ; and now your grandfather's dead, and Mary Crofton married, you cannot stay at either of the houses with single men," said my step-mother, in a very troubled tone of voice.

"No, but she might marry one of the single men," observed Miss Ramsay, whilst I felt terribly guilty and confused ; but happily neither of the ladies cared enough about me to notice the impression made by the random speech ; and then Miss Alethea wound it up a moment after by saying—

"It is a pity Marian and her cousin Luke have never thought of such a thing—such a nice provision it would be for her!"

"Only she does not desire such a provision," said I, half angry, half amused.

"That's lucky," returned Miss Ramsay, com-

posedly, “for, as I have said, it is not likely—no, I suppose it will be Juliet, with all her preaching, and praying, and playing, if she stays here much longer.”

“No, it will not,” said Mrs. Markham, raising her eyes and her voice at the same time, and fixing the former on me. “Marian might have Luke Dillon if she chose, for I see him always observing *her*, whilst Juliet runs after him in that stupid way which I should not have permitted even under Miss Jones’s chaperonage, if I had not seen he preferred Marian, and I only hope in time she will see how much it would be to her advantage to encourage the feeling. That is the reason I so often ask the young man to come here.”

This was quite a new light both to me and Miss Alethea, and she looked with something like interest on me, and astonishment at her sister’s penetration, and then observed—

“Well, you do surprise me a little, Charlotte, but if it is so, it serves to convince me that the people who say the least see the most. Well,

you have my consent to marry the parson as soon as you please, Marian."

And then, to my relief, the conversation was turned to the far more important question as to whether Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ramsay were to be duly invited to do as they proposed, and come to the Manor-house, to be present at their nephew's approaching marriage. It was very evident Miss Alethea was all in favour of the step, and contrived to present so many advantages as likely to result from it, that Mrs. Markham sent for her desk, and actually wrote, signed, and sealed a dispatch to her sister-in-law that same morning, containing a friendly acceptance of their proffered visit.

CHAPTER II.

IT happened the next morning that Juliet went out early, and did not return till we were seated at luncheon. She came into the room abruptly exclaiming—

“Have you heard about it—the escape they have all had at the Deanery?”

Mrs. Markham, who was still a little pettish, answered—

“Dear me! how you startle one, Juliet, coming in in that way, and without taking off your walking things! I am sure that great cloak must be very hot and heavy, and your bonnet is all awry. What an object you do look!”

“Oh! never mind my looks, mamma; there” (throwing them aside) “goes my cloak and

bonnet, if you object to seeing them ; but I am sure it is a mercy it was no worse, and Claude there at the time. Have not you heard anything about the fire that broke out last night after they were all gone to bed ?”

“ We never hear anything here,” replied her mother ; “ but I suppose no one is the worse for it, or we should have heard.”

“ Of course,” remarked Miss Alethea, “ for we all know ill news flies apace. But tell us all about it, Juliet—where did you hear it ?”

“ At Miss Jones’s. Her brother came in whilst I was there ; he had just come from Thorpe, and been at the Deanery ; no one was hurt, but everybody extremely frightened. It was all owing to the carelessness of the servants in leaving some of the lights that had been put up for the party last night ; they were in a little ante-room, and the man who ought to have gone round forgot all about them, and they caught some muslin curtains, and the room was just under Flora’s, and as the shutters were not closed (I know she always likes

to have them left open), she was awoke by seeing the blaze up to her windows. Just fancy, poor dear, what a fright she must have been in!"

"I suppose it was soon put out?" asked Mrs. Markham.

"Happily, yes; but not before everybody had been called up, and Flora fainted away, and no end of excitement," said Juliet, calming down a little in her account.

"A nice thing it would have been to have burnt the bride in her bed!" observed Miss Alethea.

"Oh! there was never any real danger, Mr. Jones said; though if the woodwork had caught, and the fire had not been seen so soon, there might. All the curtains were burnt; and as the top of the window had been left open to cool the room which led into the one they danced in, it made a tremendous noise and flare up. Just fancy poor Flora's horror!"

"And what did she do before she fainted away?" I asked.

"Of course she called out, and made a great noise, and then all the people in the house came running. Mr. Jones says that Claude was more active than any one in putting the fire out; and then he rode down for Mr. Jones to come and see Flora; and he had just been again, and said she was all right this morning, though of course rather upset."

"Well, all's well that ends well!" observed Miss Alethea, philosophically; while Mrs. Markham remarked,

"All owing to the stupidity of servants. Really, it is a wonder people are not oftener burnt in their beds! No thanks to them we are not. I wonder what Lord Ramsay will say to the negligence of Mrs. Elton's."

"They forgot the lights in that little room, you see, mamma, because they were only temporary ones; and they were not in the habit of going to put them out there; and we may observe also it was one result of all the dancing and revelry that had been going on that evening, and no doubt was rather out of place in a

clergyman's house," said Juliet, in her most sententious tone.

"Nonsense, child!" replied her mother; "pray do not pretend to be wiser and better than everybody else. I am very thankful all the clergy are not as precise and formal and particular as your paragon, Mr. Luke Dillon."

Seeing Juliet was about to reply in no pleasant spirit to this attack on her friend, I tried to draw her attention in another direction; and whilst we were talking, Mrs. Markham's attention was happily diverted by seeing Mr. Jones ride up to the door—come no doubt to calm any apprehensions she might have suffered on hearing of the fire at the Deanery, whilst her son was staying at the house.

At a later hour in the day we had the still greater satisfaction of seeing Claude himself, who came also on the same errand as Mr. Jones. It was nearly four o'clock when he arrived, and he seemed rather in haste to be gone again.

"You might as well stay and dine here, Claude, now you are come," said his mother.

“Impossible!—I am on my way back to the Deanery. I promised to return there for one night; to-morrow I must be at the Hall, to meet Mr. Crofton, so it will probably be a day or two before you see me here again.”

“Are you just come from the Eltons’?” asked Juliet.

“No—I had to go back to the Hall on business, and am only just come from thence; and now you must let me go. You see, I am all safe and sound.”

I followed Claude into the hall—his horse was not brought round, so we stood for a moment by the fire whilst he waited.

“I am glad you have been here to-day, Claude, just for this peep of you, for somehow when you went away yesterday morning, I had a sort of presentiment about you that you were going into some danger, and I suppose it was a sort of second sight of this fire. You were not in the least hurt?”

“Not in the least—not a hair singed or a bone broken.”

“ Well, that is a comfort; and you go back to the Hall to-morrow ?”

“ That is my full intention. But let me go now, there is a good girl. I want to get to Thorpe before the bank shuts up, so I must go and look up my horse. How slow they are all here !”

“ There are so few people, you know; but they will bring your horse round in a minute. I think I hear it coming. Besides, there is no such great hurry about the bank, for it must have closed by this time—it is quite four.”

“ You don’t say so! How provoking! I wish I had gone straight back, instead of dawdling here.”

“ I thought you were going to the bank yesterday, Claude ?”

“ So I intended, and should have been in time, but unluckily I changed my over-coat before I started from the Hall, and found when I got to Thorp I had left the pocket-book in the one I had taken off. It was a very stupid piece of forgetfulness in me, and I came over on purpose to rectify it.”

"I hope you found your pocket-book and money all safe?" I asked, rather anxiously.

"Oh, yes. I found it just where I had left it, and here it is in this pocket. I meant to have paid it in this afternoon, but have been unaccountably delayed. I thought you might all like to see me; and then I met Mr. Jones coming away from here, and he stopped to chatter, and so I am all behind hand."

"That is unlucky, but you will not forget again to-morrow, Claude dear; Mr. Crofton might think it careless."

"No doubt he will, especially as John Forest is aware of my oversight; but I shall trust to his mercy; and now good-bye."

The horse was then at the door, and I was obliged to let Claude go. I had never asked after Flora, nor had he volunteered any information. Mr. Jones had told us she was quite recovered, and as no one else seemed the worse for the fright, there was nothing more to be said on the subject; and as we saw Claude all right after his exertions, we did not trouble him

to give a more detailed account of his adventures.

I stood at the door a few moments after Claude had ridden off, listening to the reverberating echo of the horse's hoofs as he trotted briskly away, but the gathering gloom of the autumn evening prevented my following him with my eyes, and the sound soon died out in the distance. It was, however, still light enough for me to distinguish another form coming in an opposite direction, which loomed out from the dusk, and which I soon saw was that of some man quietly walking up the road to the house. My heart gave a great bound as I fancied for a moment that it must be Mr. Crofton, returned a day or two sooner than he intended, in his eagerness to meet again. As the figure approached nearer I saw my hopes had misled me, and was disappointed to see it was only my cousin Luke, who, finding me at the door, followed me into the house, saying he would not detain me, stopped by the fire, taking up his position just where Claude had stood a few minutes before.

"I only called as I passed the house," said he, to ask after you all, having just heard of the fire at the Deanery last night, though I think neither of you were there?"

"Nor you either, Luke?"

"No, or I should not have been here now. I only just heard it casually that Claude had been most active in saving Miss Crofton's life, and putting out the fire, and it was feared had received some injury."

"I can happily relieve you on that head. He is this instant ridden away perfectly unhurt."

"I am most thankful to hear it. And Miss Crofton?"

"I cannot tell you much about her. Nor is there much to relate in any way, I believe. The story seems to have increased and spread quicker than the flames themselves. Then you have not met either Miss Jones or Juliet this morning, who could either of them have perfectly reassured you?"

"No, I have been in a distant part of my parish all day, and only heard of the peril my

friends had been in casually as I returned. Surely, Cousin Marian, it must be a warning to them!"

"What, not to leave lights burning near muslin curtains when you go to bed? Yes, indeed it ought to be."

"Oh! you speak lightly" (Luke meant no pun) "of what might have been most awful. I do not wish to judge any man, and I have a sincere respect for Dean Elton, but I do regret he allows so much worldly vanity to be going on in his house. Had it not been for all this revelry and dancing, no such risk would have been incurred."

"It was all the servants' fault," I remarked.

"They were weary, no doubt, with much serving, and thus the master's fault led to the oversight of the servant."

"Will you come upstairs, Luke—Mrs. Marchmount and Juliet are there?" I asked, desirous of diverting Luke's attention from the errors of the Eltons.

"No, I am obliged to you, cousin. I have

seen you, and that suffices me." Luke then turned to go, but stopped suddenly, and came back and said hastily, "Will you always bid me leave you, Marian?"

I felt more provoked and angry than the occasion demanded, and forgot that nothing was known relative to my position by others that made a renewal of Luke's overtures so peculiarly distasteful to me; so I answered petulantly and impatiently—

"I thought that question had been settled long ago, and that you had come to your senses in the meantime."

"You mean, cousin, that I had ceased to love you?"

"In that foolish way, yes, long ago I supposed."

"Then you are mistaken. I felt I might have taken you by surprise when I first intimated the nature of my feelings regarding you, and I saw you were in earnest in declining to become my wife at that time."

"Well, I am sure you can have seen nothing

since to have altered the impression you then received," said I, still vexed and angry, but unable to leave Luke to his delusions.

"Perhaps I may have been too sanguine, but I hoped, by a series of unobtrusive attentions, to win on your regard—to prove myself in some degree worthy of your love. To this end I have come here more frequently than was formerly my wont. I have talked before you, that you might perfectly understand all my views, all my objects and aspirations in this life. I would not force myself upon you, but I have anxiously watched to observe any impression my discourse might have had upon you. Every thing that I have said, done, or even thought, subordinate to the one higher principle over all, has had reference to you. Oh, Cousin Marian, cannot you like me well enough to become my wife? We might indeed be very happy together. I would leave you free to follow out your own plans whenever they might differ from mine, being assured you could not do otherwise than right."

Poor Luke stopped here in almost breathless agitation, whilst my anger evaporated at the sight of his genuine feeling, although the expression of it was as repugnant to me as ever. However, I commanded myself enough to say as steadily as possible—

“Pray say no more on this subject, Luke. It is a most unpleasant one to me; nothing on earth could ever, under any circumstances, make me regard you in the light you wish; so please, as you desire my cousinly esteem, let it drop for ever.”

I saw Luke turn very pale by the firelight, and his lips quivered whilst he murmured—

“It is the hand of Heaven against me. Let me submit.” Then in a louder and more resolute tone he said, “Then your heart is entirely and for ever closed against me, cousin?”

“I have told you all I have to tell on that subject.”

“Be it so, then. I will return to my solitary home, never more to indulge in the distant hope which has lighted its dreariness.”

“Oh, no, Luke. I hope and trust the time will soon come when the Rectory will no longer be a solitary place to you, and you will be as happy as I wish you, with a wife that would be far better suited to you than I could ever have been.”

“A wife!” said Luke dreamily. “I have never, even since you refused me, thought of anyone in that light save yourself.”

“Then it is high time you should begin to do so, Luke. I am quite sure you will soon find some one to appreciate your many excellent qualities in a way that might make you very happy. Indeed, Luke, I should be so pleased to hear of your going to be comfortably married; so I hope it will not be long before you give me that satisfaction.”

“Ah! cousin,” said Luke, grasping my hand as I turned to leave him, “it is easy talking in that way to me, but I have somewhere heard an old song which says, ‘It is well to be off with the old love before you are on with the new.’ But since you wish it, I will try and

turn my thoughts from you henceforth ; but I cannot promise more at present, for my heart is very sore. Farewell, and God bless you !”

And then Luke went his way for the second time under similar circumstances, but happily it was the last time of his asking *me*. I went slowly upstairs, pondering over Luke’s strange infatuation for one who cared nothing for him, and never could, whilst he entirely overlooked the too evident devotion of another, who seemed the very woman in all the world best suited to be his wife. Well, I could only hope that in time he and Juliet might come to a better understanding ; they were both young enough to wait till the new idea might gradually be developed in Luke Dillon’s brain, and thence descend into his heart.

This room upstairs was a small sitting-room, dignified by the name of Mrs. Markham’s boudoir, though I believe she was the only person who so distinguished the tiny apartment. It was not a pleasant room to sit in, being small, and rather close, when doors and windows

were all shut. It was not very often that Mrs. Markham took the freak of inhabiting this little room as the family apartment, and she never did so when Claude was at home. However, on the present occasion my step-mother had retreated to her boudoir, and there we were all expected to join her, both before and after dinner.

On entering this sanctum I was aware of three pair of eyes turned inquiringly upon me, whilst Mrs. Markham, laying down her double glasses and the novel she was reading, asked—

“ May I ask who have you been entertaining, Marian ?”

Miss Ramsay peered over the top of her spectacles, and desisted from finishing an entry she was making in a formidable-looking account-book, whilst she inquired in her turn—

“ Was that Claude come back ?”

Juliet suspended her needle for a moment in the coarse garment she was employed on, and looked inquiringly at me, whilst she observed :

“ Oh ! no ; I heard Claude’s horse go past the window full trot half an hour ago.”

I hastened to satisfy all by telling them of Luke Dillon's visit of inquiry, though it may be supposed I kept back the more important subject of our late colloquy. Mrs. Markham, hearing who the visitor was, turned to her book with a smile that was half sneer, whilst Miss Ramsay curtly remarked—

"He is grown very anxious about Claude all of a sudden."

Juliet, on her part, took up her work with a little jerk, and asked—

"Why did Mr. Dillon go away in such a hurry? If you had brought him up here, I could have given him some reports he asked me to write out, and I know he wants them in a day or two."

I could only answer, by way of consolation—

"I daresay he will come again when he wants them, and Luke said he had been out all day, so was in a hurry, no doubt, to get home."

"You seem to have been in no hurry to send him away, Marian, for I have heard you talking

together this last half hour," said poor Juliet, with more pettishness in her tone and manner than she generally displayed to me. Not that she was jealous in any way of me, whom she only thought of as his cousin, or even, I believed, realised the fact of his being more to her than the active clergyman of her beloved parish, to whom she looked for counsel and comfort on every occasion, or had ever asked herself the question how much the man himself had to do with the untiring energy and devotion with which she entered into all the parochial details.

No doubt the poor girl felt it would have been a pleasant break in the dreary monotony of that long evening to have had Luke's company in the dull little boudoir, and she was vexed with my insensibility in letting him go away after enjoying my own cousinly interview with the young clergyman by the hall fire. She had evidently been expecting him to come upstairs, as she had recognised the voice of the speaker, though of course unable to distinguish

a word of our conversation in the distant apartment.

I felt vexed for my young sister, though I dared not notice the trouble I detected in her unconscious heart, and felt half inclined to be indignant with my cousin Luke. But there was no use in anything I might think or feel on the occasion. I had no power to help, and dared not interfere. I tried to find comfort from repeating to myself, "What will be, will be." Everything will work round to its proper place in due time. Alas ! alas ! I was forced to see the fallacy of that argument at last, or, it might be, we often mistake the right for the wrong place in our short-sighted wisdom.

CHAPTER III.

I WAS sitting writing in the dining-room alone the next morning (the boudoir being still in use, and the drawing-room rather cold), when Juliet came in. She walked quietly up to me and pressed her lips on my forehead, saying in an unusually gentle tone,

“Is it true, Minnie? are we to wish you joy?”

“What do you mean, Juliet?” with a guilty flush rising in my face.

“Ah! you look as if it were, sister. Do not mind telling me, dear. Mamma and Aunt Alethea were talking about it for the first time —such an idea never entered my head before, so I thought I would come at once and ask you—I was sure you would not mind telling me?”

“Telling you what?”

“Oh, you must know if it is so, that you and your cousin Luke are attached, in fact—are thinking of marrying?”

“There never was a greater mistake made than that; believe me, Juliet, if I were to live a hundred years, I should never be the wife of my cousin Luke; so please forget all that nonsense, dear, and contradict it as you may from the best authority, if you ever hear it said again.”

“I thought so,” said poor Juliet, sitting down and untying her bonnet strings, with an air of unconscious relief, as she continued, “It seemed so strange, if that had really been the case, you should never have given me the slightest hint, or Mr. Dillon either, knowing the deep interest I must take in your happiness; but when you say a thing I know you mean it, Marian?”

“I should hope so, indeed, Juliet.”

“I can’t think what put it into mamma’s head all at once (for she cares so little about things in general), except it was your staying with him so long talking down stairs yesterday

evening, when we were all in the boudoir."

"If you had been downstairs in the drawing-room instead, I daresay the conversation would have been more general ; as it was, Luke did not care to go up to the boudoir, as he did not intend staying."

"Ah, that horrid little room ; I don't wonder at it. I wish mamma had not such a fancy for sitting there in the winter."

"So do I. And now I have satisfied you on the point you came to inquire into, please, dear, let me get on with my letter—it is a foreign one, and I must finish it to-day."

"A foreign one ! Oh, Marian, I wonder whether that is true, that Flora told me about you in London ; don't be angry, it was only that some one you met there, a friend of our eldest brother's, wished you to marry him, and go out to India. Is it possible you are thinking of doing so, and never told me a word about it ?" said Juliet, suddenly propelled into a sisterly interest in my affairs.

I could only answer to that,

"I have certainly no intention whatever of going to India; nor am I writing to any one in India—my letter is to Mary Crofton—I mean Lady Manwairing."

"I like old names best," answered Juliet; "I shall never fancy Flora Lady Ramsay. Well, it is a blessing to hear you have no thoughts of leaving us, Marian; you can't think how I miss you when you are away, though I say so little about it. Now I must go, Miss Jones will be waiting for me to go to the school."

Juliet actually gave me another kiss, a very unusual proceeding for one so undemonstrative, but it was no doubt in gratitude for the comfort I had given her in respect to Luke Dillon. I felt a little guilty about that, she had taken to herself, as to my remaining long at home, and quite longed to tell my only sister of my approaching happiness, but I did not dare. I was forbidden that gratification, though the time must soon come when everything would be as open and straightforward as I could desire at the old home. I was thankful a day was now actually

fixed for Flora's marriage, and after that I should petition Mr. Crofton to make our intentions known, at least to my own family. We might keep the matter as quiet as he could desire with everybody else. I disliked concealment so much that I felt quite a dissembler as I wrote to my friend Mary, and said nothing of all that concerned us both so nearly, or mentioned the happiness in prospect of seeing her again so soon; but my very next letter, I trusted, would make amends for all that was now left unsaid.

That was the very day Mr. Crofton had fixed to return home. I knew it would be late, so there was no chance of seeing him that afternoon but in all probability we should meet the next day. Perhaps he might even call on his way going to or coming from Thorpe, where he would most likely go first to bring Flora home. So I wrapped myself up in happy visions of what might soon come to pass.

That day passed without anything to disturb its tranquillity. We saw no one, and Juliet did not go out to her school or choir. She sat at home

quietly working and reading, and said much less than usual about her parish proceedings. I could not help fancying her eyes were beginning to be a little opened as to her own feelings in regard to the real cause of her interest in them, and she became more reticent in consequence. There was not much conversation going on between any of us, for we still occupied the obnoxious little boudoir, in which every word that was spoken was fully audible to everyone in it. It was a drizzling, foggy, dark November evening, and Mrs. Markham ordered candles early, to shut out the darkness without, but I do not think the aspect within was much more cheerful. However, I had a fund of inward content that sufficed me to meditate upon, so I could well afford a few dull days, or even weeks, till the bright time which I anticipated should come. It even pleased me to think, by way of contrast, what would have been my feelings had no such future joy-beams been awarded me to lighten the present gloom and monotony; should I have remained quietly ac-

quiescent to live on for ever silent and sad in the small room, whilst my step-mother read her novel, or rather dozed over it, or listening to the scratch of Miss Ramsay's indefatigable pen, as it noted down every domestic occurrence in that well-worn book?

I thought then with pity of my poor Juliet, who would be left in such uncongenial and unsympathising society that very winter, whilst I should be far away, with the chosen and well-beloved companion of my heart! As I contrasted my fate with hers, I looked compassionately upon her, and wondered how it would end with her, in regard to my cousin Luke. I even speculated upon the possibility of diverting her regard into some other channel, where it might meet with more grateful response. When my own happiness was secured, I should never rest till Juliet was made happy also.

Whilst I pursued the thread of my cogitations, I looked so intently upon Juliet, as she sat at the table working under the full light of the lamp, that, moved by that strange inward

consciousness that makes us so soon aware of a fixed regard, she lifted her eyes to mine and laughed as she met my earnest gaze.

“What is it, Marian? Is it me or my work that you are looking at so intently. I am working so hard to finish this bundle of little things I promised to take Nanny Stone. I thought I had better get them done to-day, as I daresay Flora will be here to-morrow, and wish me very likely to go to her; and I could not refuse, now her time for being at home is so short, that I would go to her at once if I’m wanted.”

Then after all Juliet was not unhappy; she was following the bent of her inclination in working for the poor, and making her own little plans for meeting her friend. I do not even suppose she was at that time thinking about Luke half as much as I was, so upon that discovery I smiled also, and replied I thought it was very likely that Flora *would* claim her as soon as she returned home; perhaps she would call on her way back the next day from the Deanery to ask her.

"Then I shall be quite ready, especially if you have nothing particular to do, and would help me a little," returned Juliet, holding out a little half-made garment appealingly.

I remember taking it, and as I worked at it and talked now and then in an undertone to Juliet, the sense of gloom and dreariness gradually wore off, as well as my sensations of intense pity for my young sister, who was to be left behind in those familiar scenes, pursuing such monotonous occupations, whilst I should be surrounded by all the variety that love and luxury could bestow on me on my bridal tour!

So by degrees my thoughts toned down to the level of my companion's employment and her train of ideas, which were like everything else about Juliet, very plain and very practical. She told me she had not been out that day at all, on account of finishing the work she was about, but intended taking it early to Mrs. Stone, in case Flora should call on her way to the Hall, when she wished to be at home.

So the evening passed away better than I

had anticipated at its commencement. It was rather a new feeling in which I had began to indulge at that time, of extreme weariness, almost impatience of everything around me. I had never felt it before my engagement to Mr. Crofton, and I suppose it was one of the consequences of the concealment which attended it; or it might arise from an instinctive sense of a great crisis approaching in my life's hitherto quiet history.

Juliet went out early the next morning, as she had purposed, taking her little bundle of things with her; but she did not return as soon as I expected. It was past the luncheon hour when she came back. She looked a little vexed as she said,

“I need not have hurried so to be in time for Flora. Mr. Jones told his sister she went home yesterday.”

“Did she? Then I suppose her father came the day before?” said I, interested in my turn.

“I suppose so. I think she said she was to meet him at the station as he returned from

London by the late train. So she went there in the Eltons' carriage, and they left her there."

I sat and mused upon Juliet's tidings. Suddenly she looked up at me, and said,

"I don't think, after all, Mr. Crofton came home last night."

"No—why not?"

"Because I met James Waters's little boy—he is one of the under-gardeners, you know—and I asked after his mother, and he said she was gone holiday-making; but his father was sure to come home to-night, as the master was expected back; and Mr. Ferroll, the head-gardener, said all his men would be wanted when Mr. Crofton came back."

"I don't think Mr. Crofton would care much whether the under-gardener had a little longer holiday," I observed, with something of that uneasy state of feeling in which we are apt to cavil at trifles, by way, I believe, of diverting our thoughts from other considerations.

"Very likely," returned Juliet, carelessly.
"But I daresay Ferroll himself might want him

back—there will be a great deal to do in carrying plants to the conservatory ; and Flora likes to have all she can get in the house ; and now I daresay she will want Ferroll particularly to arrange them for her ; and Waters is the best hand they have, I have heard them say. Ferroll can never spare him when he is busy himself."

" You seem to know all the little ins and outs of the establishment at the Hall," I remarked, with a certain feeling of foolish jealousy.

" Yes, it is very natural I should," replied Juliet, simply, " so much as I have been with Flora since her aunt married ; and she has had to order about things herself. I was always with her on those occasions, and I was often useful to her, from knowing all the people about in the cottages so well. They took two or three little boys to weed in the plantations, and rake up the dead leaves, on my recommendation."

" Juliet," said I, a sudden spasm of fear contracting my heart, " have you heard anything of Claude ?—is he at the Hall ?"

"I don't know," she answered indifferently; "I rather fancy from something Miss Jones said, that they persuaded him to remain another day at the Deanery—that is, till this evening. I know pretty well they would, if they could, on Carrie's account—she makes herself quite foolish about him."

"But if Mr. Crofton was expected back a day sooner?"

"In that case he must go and meet him, even if he had to go back again."

"Nonsense; I don't think Claude cares enough for Carrie Elton to be running about after her in that way. If Mr. Crofton did return yesterday, Claude would be sure to be at home to meet him. Are you quite sure, Juliet, that Flora did return home yesterday evening?"

"Yes, quite sure, for Mr. Jones had been to the Deanery late, and found his patient flown."

"Go down and see her, Juliet!" I exclaimed, suddenly, after a moment's pause.

My sister opened her eyes wider than usual,

looked at me, and then gently shook her head, saying,

“No, thank you, Marian, it is rather too late for such a walk there and back. Why, it would be quite dark before I got home again. Besides, I can wait very well till to-morrow—I do not want to go there to be asked to stay, as they must do if I walk over so late.”

“Never fear, you will have nothing with you, so cannot stay; besides, I will walk part of the way with you, and wait for you, to come home together.”

“That would be absurd; as if you could not come on with me to the house. But I tell you, Marian, I do not wish to go so late this evening. If I did wish it I should have no fears about going alone, if it were pitch dark. I know every step of the road, and every creature far and near that I should be likely to meet.”

“Oh! Juliet, Juliet!” I exclaimed, almost wringing my hands, “do—do, I entreat you, go over and ask after Flora, and then come back to me! Come, let us go.”

"Indeed, I can do no such foolish thing this evening," said Juliet, with such quiet determination that I saw it was vain to expect any such concession on her part; and her coolness and decision had a calming effect on my apparently causeless perturbation, and I began to think I must be very foolish for entertaining such nameless apprehensions. So Juliet and I sat silent in the dim dining-room, looking out into the gathering gloom of the approaching winter evening. At length Juliet roused herself from an unwonted meditation, and taking up some knitting, with which she was always provided, she asked,

"Are you afraid that Flora is ill, or in any sort of danger?"

"Yes, in danger."

Then Juliet jumped up and came to me with a quick inquiry.

"Oh! Marian, how unkind never to tell me, or Miss Jones either. And that is the reason she is gone home, and poor Mr. Crofton sent for but not come. Now do, dear sister, tell me

all you know. Miss Jones only told me she was gone home unexpectedly, and the Eltons expected her to meet her father at the station. Oh ! she could not have been ill and in danger, as you say, or Mrs. Elton would never have let her go, or she would have gone with her."

Then Juliet paused, and looked inquiringly into my face.

"I don't mean she is ill—in danger that way ; but I don't like her to be at home in that great house all alone, if her father is not with her."

"Oh ! that is all !" said Juliet, slowly returning to her seat, and looking much relieved as she resumed her knitting. "I cannot think what is come to you lately. Indeed I think you are getting quite fanciful."

"I hope I am," I murmured ; "but I do confess I am uneasy. I cannot help it, but I believe I am stupid in wishing you to go all that way, my poor dear Juliet."

"I should not mind that if there were any call to do it, but I cannot see that there is ; but look, here is Mr. Dillon coming up to the house.

You don't want another tête-à-tête with him, do you, Marian?" said she, with a grave smile. "Because if you do, don't mind telling me honestly, and I'll be off."

"I settled that matter, I thought, when you asked me before," I answered, a little petulently.

So Juliet remained, and my cousin Luke came boldly into the room. His manner was very quiet and composed, rather more distant to me than to Juliet, whom he particularly addressed, as he said,

"I saw you both in this room, and I was taking the short cross by the house through the paddock, so I came in just—just—to——"

"To inquire after us all?" I asked, not sorry for the diversion to our thoughts and conversation, Juliet being present.

There was a peculiar expression in the young man's face as he looked at us both, with something of anxiety in his voice and manner, and then replied slowly, and somewhat vaguely,

"I heard Mr. Crofton was expected down this evening?"

"Oh ! then he did not go home, as was fancied yesterday. *This* is the day he *was* to be at the Hall, but Juliet tells me there has been a change in all their plans."

"I know nothing for certain, only what Miss Jones told me," said Juliet, in an exculpatory voice. Whilst I asked,

"Where is Claude?"

"Not at the Hall I hear," answered Luke shortly ; and I felt relieved, but added,

"And Flora can hardly be there alone ?"

"I have not heard that she is," answered Luke.

"Oh ! but Mr. Jones said she had left the Eltons'," exclaimed Juliet.

"Possibly he might be mistaken—he is sometimes," answered Luke. "She might have driven down to meet her father, and not meeting him, have returned ; but really I know nothing for certain," said Luke.

"I daresay we shall see some of them to-morrow," said Juliet, "and then they will give us an account of all their proceedings. In the mean-

time we must be content to suppose them all safe and well,"—with a little smile and glance at me, as if in ridicule of my foolish fancies, and half in unconscious happiness because of Luke's presence. He made, however, a very short visit, but it brought a glow of pleasurable contentment into Juliet's face, for all his conversation was pointedly addressed to her, and it seemed to make her happy, so I was glad he had been, though rather puzzled to know why, as his visit was so brief.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN I joined the family party in the boudoir just before dinner, I found my stepmother grumbling over a letter it appeared she had just received.

"Nothing the matter, I hope?" I asked Juliet.

"Oh! no—it is only a note from Claude."

Mrs. Markham, hearing my observation, tossed the letter towards me, saying—

"There, you can read what he says; it won't take you long—it is short enough—and perhaps you can tell us what it means, for I believe you are more in his confidence than anyone else."

I took the note and read :—

"DEAREST MOTHER,

"You will be surprised to hear I

am just starting for London. I wish to catch Mr. Crofton before he comes down. I hope to be back in a short time, though I may be detained a few weeks; so do not expect me till you see me. Love to all.

“Your affectionate son,

“CLAUDE MARKHAM.”

I stood meditating over my brother's note, quite forgetting that I was expected to solve the mystery of his unexpected departure, till reminded of it by Mrs. Markham impatiently asking—

“Well, you have read it by this time, I suppose—can you tell me anything about it? It is quite a sudden freak on his part, I suppose, unless he said anything to you about it two or three days ago, when he came over, and you were talking to him in the Hall before he went away. Pray did he confide his intention to you?”

I started at the sound of her voice, for I was lost in a maze of conjecture on the subject; but

one thing stood out clear and defined in my mind, and that was that Claude was escaping from a great danger—that he had discovered there was no safety for himself or others, save by a hasty and precipitate flight, and, strange and unaccountable as the step might appear, he had resolved upon it. Would to heaven it might not be too late! I hardly dared think—a choking sensation kept me silent; whilst I rapidly came to the conclusion that, whatever I might imagine, it was, after all, but conjecture. I had no right to speak my thoughts. After all, I might be altogether wrong—utterly mistaken as to the cause of my brother's sudden journey to London. It might be entirely a matter of business, after all; his desiring to catch Mr. Crofton before he left town implied something of the kind. It was probably a communication he desired to make whilst his patron was on the spot where his presence might be required, and thus save him the trouble of retracing his steps. I knew Mr. Crofton had constant intercourse by letter with

men of business in London at that time, and Claude, who was conversant with all his affairs, was, it might be, acting wisely for him in the present instance. I was therefore able to answer my step-mother's impatient query, after a moment or two, with perfect composure, if not assurance, saying—

“Claude never talks of his own affairs or those of others to me, but I daresay he is gone on matters of business to meet Mr. Crofton before he leaves London—perhaps to spare him another journey there.”

“Then what makes him talk of a few weeks? Why, in that case he will not be back to the wedding. I must have him at home then, especially if we are to have people here.”

“Never mind the people now,” said Miss Ramsay, who was always imperturbable, and never neglectful of meal times, under any circumstances; “it is past six now, and if we are supposed to dine at six, we may as well order dinner before seven, and not stand talking here any longer. It gets servants into such

irregular ways, besides spoiling your dinner."

Thus admonished, we proceeded with as little delay as might be to the dining-room; and it was not till some time after that, when we were once more assembled in the little room upstairs, that Miss Ramsay again entertained the subject of Claude's sudden departure, for the cause of which she gave her own opinion in the following speech, in answer to some querulous conjecture hazarded by Mrs. Markham, as she took up her novel, and her position on the sofa for the evening—

"What is the use of your bothering yourself in that way about the boy, Charlotte? Perhaps he is gone on his own account; or he may be on Mr. Crofton's. It really cannot signify much which it is. He may wish to take a little holiday, and in that case would be absent a week or two—as long as he can be spared; or if Mr. Crofton does not consent to a holiday now, he will be back in a day or two. I dare-say he has got some plan in his head—perhaps he has had an invitation to go somewhere

directly with a friend or friends he may have made in this visit at the Deanery. Young men do things in such a hurry sometimes—they do not stop to think and consider and weigh all the *pros* and *cons*, like us old women. Very likely he thinks by setting off at once and meeting Mr. Crofton in town, he shall be half way to what he wants to do."

"That *is* not like Claude," I ventured to remark.

"No, indeed," chimed in his mother; "especially *at this time*, and with the wedding so near."

"Oh! bother the wedding," returned Miss Alethea. "Young men don't care about weddings second hand—it is all very well when it is their own; and even then they would be glad to cut and run as soon as the ceremony is fairly over—(with the bride, of course)—and escape all the finery and feasting and fuss people seem so fond of. I am sure I should."

"I quite agree with you, Aunt Alethea," said Juliet, looking up from her work; "I think

from all I hear of weddings in general, with lots of company and fine clothes and feasting, must make it the most trying and unpleasant thing in the world."

"It *ought*, at all events, to be the happiest; and I am sure Mary Manwairing's was," said I, boldly,

"Ah! because it was so quiet, as I have heard; and no doubt they were able to feel and realize the solemnity of the step they were taking."

"What nonsense you do talk, Juliet!" said her mother, peevishly. "You would make a wedding a duller thing than it is at the best. I am sure it needs a little gaiety to enliven it."

"I should not think so," said the young girl, gravely. "The presence of the few you love at such a time I should think would be quite enough, and more suitable on so serious an occasion than crowds of indifferent people about you. I hope if ever I am married, mamma, you will ask no one, and have no grand party."

"That depends on whom you may marry,

Juliet. I shall make no such promises. If you make a suitable choice, I shall hope to have a gay wedding."

"Gaiety is not much in my way, mamma."

"I wish it were, child; it is so stupid and unnatural to be grave and mopish at nineteen."

"Not mopish, I hope, mamma, for I feel quite cheerful and happy; and perhaps the most so when I seem gravest. But I do not feel, or mean to be mopish."

"You are beyond my comprehension, Juliet," replied her mother, with a little impatient shrug; "really I don't see what use children are if they will all go their own way, and think themselves wiser than their mothers, which seems the fashion now-a-days."

"I suppose children as they grow up may have their own independent views and ideas on different subjects," said Juliet, in the sententious tone I always dreaded to hear.

I therefore hastened to draw off Mrs. Markham's attention, and prevent all reply that

might have led to more last words, by asking,

“How did that letter come? It could not have been sent by the post.”

“No—Mrs. Elton sent a messenger over with it; it ought to have been posted, but was overlooked, so thinking I might like to have it, she sent over.”

“Did you see the messenger?”

“No—certainly not. Why should I? Besides, the man did not wait—he came and went whilst I was dressing for dinner.”

“It was yesterday, then, yesterday evening, that Claude went up to town.”

“I suppose so—the day after he was here; when, it seems, he said nothing about it to anyone,” observed his mother.

“He was then on his road back to Thorpe with some money he had forgotten to take with him the day before to the bank,” I said, recalling the fact at the moment.

“Dear me!” exclaimed Miss Ramsay, who was busy sorting and tying up various small household bills. “I hope he did not lose the

money on the way, and then set off to tell Mr. Crofton, and send a detective to trace out the notes!"

"Nonsense," said the mother. "Claude was not likely to lose Mr. Crofton's money; he has had plenty of it pass through his hands before now."

"Well, I suppose he is sure to write to you from London, so you will get a line, I daresay, to-morrow, and in the meantime we had better not bother ourselves any more about him; he is quite able to take care of himself, I hope, here or in London."

And so the subject was dropped for that evening. The next morning came, however, but brought no tidings of Claude, or the cause of his absence. My first thought that day was that in the course of it I should certainly see or hear something of or from Mr. Crofton, and he would be able to tell us all we wished to hear. I was sure he must have returned the evening before, unless the same cause that had taken Claude to London should have detained him

there also. In that case, I fancied he would have written. Then I felt rather glad he had not done so, because I might still look for the joy of seeing him any time during the course of the day.

There was a good deal of speculation at the breakfast-table that morning as to whether our friends were then at the Hall or not. Juliet was evidently expecting Flora to call that same morning, and was prepared to return with her, if invited. I fancy there had been some agreement to that effect between the two girls when they last parted. The day wore slowly away. We none of us seemed inclined to move from the house, and no one came near us. I cannot explain the sort of feeling that evidently oppressed and depressed us all. We seemed to be expecting something, but nothing came. It grew dark, and Mrs. Markham ordered lights into her sitting-room upstairs. I was restless, and could not endure the idea of the confinement in that small space.

Juliet, quiet and composed, gave up the

watch she had been keeping all the day, and saying she had some music to copy out, took it with her to the boudoir, and settled herself to her occupation. Mrs. Markham began to wonder and to fidget. Surely her friend Mr. Jones might have dropped in with some of the news of the neighbourhood.

“Or Miss Jones might have taken the trouble of coming and inquiring after us; but people never care to come just when you may happen to want them,” said Miss Ramsay, who, having some work to do, was quite ready to gossip with a friend during the time she was so occupied.

“And Mr. Dillon might have looked in if he had heard anything of Mr. Crofton and Claude,” observed Juliet, in a low voice to me.

But, as I have said, I could not remain long in one place. The air of the close little room became oppressive to me, my head began to burn, whilst my hands and feet were cold. I left the boudoir, and going downstairs, began pacing the hall with uneven steps, pausing

every moment to look out of the windows, which were not closed, and to look as far as I could through the solemn stillness of the darkening evening. Everything seemed very quiet without, and I opened the casement window and leaned out. It was a fine night, only a few stars then visible. There was no wind, and everything seemed most calm and peaceful. The only sound I could hear was the noise made by the falling of the chestnuts in their heavy bristling pods, as they kept dropping at short intervals, with a dull muffled noise, on to the heaps of withered leaves lying beneath the trees.

Suddenly there was another sound heard in the distance; it came nearer and nearer, and a quick decided step approached the house. It was a step which made my heart give one great bound, and then beat with a choking rapidity. It was—I was sure it was *Him*; that was all my thought, and in the dusk I leant far out of the window, and then I could plainly discern the form of him I hoped and longed

to see with such restless impatience. He did not appear to notice me, as he drew nearer to the house; was he coming to call at that late hour? It was not like his usual habits to do so; but probably he had not had time to do so before. At all events, I might stay and watch him; there was a tranquillizing joy in the very sense of his presence so near, and I felt sure he would not go away without our having exchanged one little happy word—one long lingering hand clasp in the silence of that quiet night.

He drew nearer, he stood and looked upon our house, he approached quite close, but still did not seem as if he were about to seek an entrance there. He came at last into a slender streak of light, made by the young rising moon upon the pathway, almost under the window where I stood. With a sudden and undefinable sensation of apprehension I drew back from my post of observation, for that ray of light revealed to me the face of my lover with so entirely strange an expression resting

on it, that I felt my joy all freeze up, and a nameless dread take its place. It might have been the effect of moonlight, but Mr. Crofton appeared to me ghastly pale, his features drawn up and contracted; a lowering dark look was in his eyes, as he looked up, attracted by the movement I had made, and then he saw me. There was no smile of recognition on his wan lips, nor slightest lighting up of happiness in that stern countenance. His voice was low and husky, as he came up to the window and said, "Is that you, Marian?" and with a sinking heart and faltering voice I could only whisper, "Yes."

"Then come out here for a few moments; put something over you. I must speak to you —the sooner the better."

Strange, strange it all seemed! A sensation of sick horror so oppressed me, that I was hardly sensible of what I did and felt in the awful pause that ensued, whilst I mechanically took down my garden cloak and hat, and even put on overshoes to encounter the damp and wet

ground without. I was hardly aware that I did so, but it was almost a relief to engage in those little everyday proceedings for going out, especially at that unwonted hour. Though full of eager impatience to be with him again, that longing was so tempered by a horrible apprehension, that I lingered over my employment whilst preparing to obey him.

At last I was ready. I opened the door and softly closed it behind me. Mr. Crofton had moved on a little way further from the house; he was retracing his steps down the road. He looked round as he heard the sound of my approaching steps; he did not take my hands in his as usual, but mechanically held out his arm, and I took it quietly and with composure, though a sensation of despair was tugging at my heart-strings. We walked on in silence a few minutes till we came to a little gate which divided the grounds from a field beyond. He then dropped my arm, and leant both of his on the top rail, and without looking at me said, in a calm cold voice,

"You have heard all, by this time?"

"All what? I have heard nothing."

"Is that possible! I am grieved, then, to be the one to tell you that your brother has stolen my daughter away from me, and from her intended husband."

He said no more, but it was enough! Then all my worst fears and apprehensions were too surely confirmed; the intensity of the horror that filled my mind on hearing this communication seemed to benumb every faculty, and even imparted a rigidity to my frame that braced me, so that I did not fall, though every nerve was tingling with agony. But still my first thoughts were all for him—for what he must be enduring. I saw, in spite of his self-control, that he shook in every limb; he leaned upon the gate heavily, as though he needed the firm support. I longed to comfort him, but I knew not how. I needed comfort too, but there was none to give it henceforth to me. As soon as my trembling lips could form the words I said,

"This is a dreadful, overwhelming blow to us all."

"Yes, to all," he replied mechanically; and the hopeless anguish of his tone struck upon the sources of my tears, and they came to my relief.

"Is there nothing to be done?" I asked at last.

"What would you wish to be done in such a case?" he replied with a voice harsh with emotion and just displeasure. "A girl so lost, a man so depraved."

"It might have been worse," I urged, hardly knowing what I said in that moment of darkness and distress.

He only replied,

"Might it? I hardly think so, though possibly the world may; but to my mind such doubly-dyed treachery on the one hand, and heartless duplicity and levity on the other, can never be surpassed. I know what you are thinking of, Marian, and have not forgotten my past experiences; I have all along feared something of the kind for that unhappy girl, but trusted she would have been safe in the hands in which (but for

this) she would so soon have been placed. Well ! well ! no doubt it was inherent in her nature, and all my care was insufficient to deal with that corrupt and perverse nature. But for that man I feel there can be no forgiveness here or • hereafter."

I could only answer him by my suppressed tears and sobs, for it was Claude—my dearly-loved brother of whom he spoke, yet what could I say on his behalf ? I felt certain, too, that he had been ensnared by that beautiful, heartless girl, who loved him in her own wild reckless way ; and had, in some inscrutable manner, so entangled him in her toils, that he had for her sacrificed every sentiment of honour and gratitude, so deeply owing to his best friend and benefactor. Alas ! alas ! for my poor dear misguided brother Claude. At the sight and hearing of my unrepressible distress, Mr. Crofton's stern mood softened a little, and he said more gently,

" My poor girl, this is hard for you to bear, as well as me ; we must both suffer for the guilty, and we may not suffer together. I will either

write to, or see you again before I leave home. Now go in; be brave; I believe you can be so, Marian. Go now, dear." His last words were almost inaudible, but I obeyed in silence—I felt I could bear up no longer.

CHAPTER V.

HOW I retraced my steps and reached the house that evening, I can hardly tell. I had, however, been somewhat hardly nurtured, and never in the habit of giving way either to bodily or mental illness or distress when it could be helped. It had not been an indulgent training, but it served me in good stead when self-denial and fortitude were called for; besides which, though delicate in appearance as I was often told, I was blessed with a good healthy constitution, as was fitting for a young Yorkshire woman, brought up in the heart of its moors and mountains. I say this, because I believe many a more delicately cared for girl would have taken to their bed on their return home from an interview so full of anguish as mine

had been. It was an hour of trial I can never forget, and the pain of it seemed almost intolerable. The revelation I had then heard, involved the loss both of the brother I loved so well, and of the only man I had ever regarded with that affection which would endure through life.

I felt, after the disgraceful history I had just heard, I could never become Keene Crofton's wife. Nor was it fitting that I should be—he could never marry a Markham. Betrayed and deceived as he had been by the brother, how could he take the sister to his heart and home? All this made itself dimly apparent to my mind as I walked through the wet dreary road back to the house; heedless of my way, splashing through the pools of water, and over the damp dank beds of decaying leaves, unseen and almost unfelt, whilst I shivered as I went along, but more from suppressed agitation and anguish than from any bodily sensation of cold. There was no time to dwell exclusively on my own misery, as I felt how deeply Claude's dereliction from all that was right and honourable would

strike at the domestic peace of our little household.

I felt intense pity for the mother who, weak and selfish as she might be in many respects, yet loved that son with all the affection of which she was capable ; she was, too, so proud of her handsome Claude. Every one had hitherto had a kind word for the young man, who with his sweet, gay, genial temper brought sunshine into every house he entered. Kind and generous too was he, ever thoughtful of his mother and observant of her wishes. To see him so cast away was worse almost than to mourn him dead.

It was a horrible complication of misery, for it was his cousin's intended wife—almost his bride—that he had taken, and it was his trusting liberal benefactor's daughter he had enticed from her happy home and bright prospects. Such, at least, would be the way the world would regard Claude's conduct. No one would suspect, as I did, that it was Flora's perfidy and persuasion that had wrought all this irremediable evil.

What could I say to my step-mother, how conceal or how reveal the dreadful story? Miss Ramsay, too, in her devotion to her deluded and deceived kinsman Lord Ramsay, how would she denounce the other and most guilty nephew? Of poor Juliet I also thought. How would she bear Claude's degradation, and worse, almost, her friend's fall from her good opinion? Juliet, whose sense of right and wrong was so simple and so pure, and yet severe, as is the case so often with those who have been untried and untempted themselves.

All this that I have been long recording rushed through my heart and head with a rapidity that was almost overwhelming; and yet I constrained myself to close the hall door as noiselessly as I had done when I last passed through it on my woeful mission. I hung up my cloak and divested myself of my hat and overshoes, as on ordinary occasions, absorbed in my bitter thoughts, and wondering how I could make the communication that seemed to devolve upon me. Then as I turned in my perplexity and

went farther into the hall, I saw there was some one standing by the fire leisurely warming their hands, and discovered the intruder to be our gossiping little doctor, Mr. Jones. There was enough light to see that his usually cheerful face wore a very mournful expression as he slowly advanced to shake hands with me. He had seen me come in from my late ramble, though I had not perceived him, and he began by observing—"Rather imprudent, my dear young lady, to be out walking at such an hour. I fear you will suffer."

The word "suffer" was the only one that struck any responsive chord, and I answered—

"We must all suffer, Mr. Jones."

"Ah! ah—yes, poor thing, poor thing—you have heard, then?"

"I have just seen Mr. Crofton," I answered, without any idea of concealment.

Our misfortune would be too patent to all the neighbourhood to allow of any hiding or pretence, nether did I care that all the world should know I had gone out that evening to meet Mr.

Crofton. He was no longer my affianced lover ; he had retreated back into his old place in regard to me ; and yet not that exactly, for he could never be my dear and trusting friend again. I should henceforth be only a Markham, a sister of Claude Markham's, to be shunned and despised as such. Our past relations none would ever guess, and he himself would only feel thankful that such was the case, and that he was still free to leave me for ever.

I felt it must be so. He had shown no relenting tenderness for me in that dreadful interview —he had cast me off almost as if I had been a partaker in my brother's sins. And yet a healing thought arose out of all that black darkness, and that was, what could it have been but some gentler feeling that caused the stern, broken-hearted man to wander round our house that evening ?—a house he could never more enter ; neither could he in any way have expected to have seen me at the window or elsewhere that dreary evening.

There was a long pause after I had spoken.

I stood silent, by the fire, engaged in thinking what I have just described. I was in that frame of mind when nothing seems strange or unnatural or out of place. My own mind was so unhinged, it could not speculate on cause and effect with ordinary clearness. Thus it did not strike me as odd finding Mr. Jones quietly established by the hall fire, knowing he was not in the house when I left it. I had no heart to ask any questions, or enough interest to wish for a reply. At last Mr. Jones addressed me—

“ You will wonder to find me here, Miss Markham ? ”

“ Oh ! no, I don’t wonder.”

“ Mr. Dillon thought I had better come with him ; it was very thoughtful of him ; he is gone upstairs to break the news to Mrs. Markham and the other ladies ; he thought he should find you there too.”

“ No, I was not there.”

“ So I see—so I see. It will be a terrible blow to them all. I did not think Mr. Crofton, poor man, could have borne up to have told you himself.”

"Yes, he told me himself."

"Ah! I see, poor dear young lady, you are half stunned by the sad news; you have not got over it yet, but you must bear up—it might have been worse; it is better to run away before marriage than after, as they say the young lady's mother unfortunately did," said the good doctor bluntly, but with kindly intention.

I started as if I had been stung; the words aroused me to a keener sense of anguish. My poor, poor friend! and all his domestic sorrows came so vividly before me, and I was now shut out for ever from him—could never soothe his hours of sadness, or minister to his happier ones! And then I broke down into a passion of tears, which calmed and softened my anguish. Mr. Jones stood compassionately regarding me, shaking his head from time to time, murmuring, "That's right—better cry; you will be all the better for it. It is a bad job, no doubt, considering all things; but take comfort, my dear Miss Markham—it might, as I say, have been worse. Things may come

round in time ; look on the bright side as much as you can—it might have been worse.”

The good man little knew it could *not* have been worse for me, but, as he said, time might soften down things, at least in the worldly view of the case. I did not attempt to answer him, and soon after my cousin Luke’s steady step was heard, and he himself appeared. He did not see me at first, but walked up to the doctor, saying, in a low tone,

“ You had better go up to Mrs. Markham, and see if you can give something to compose her. She is very hysterical, and, of course, is dreadfully cut up by the sad news. Her daughter is with her, and bears up well though much shocked and distressed, and Miss Ramsay is exerting herself for the sake of her sister. Miss Markham I have not yet seen.”

“ I am here, Luke,” I said from my dark corner.

Then Luke came up to me as Mr. Jones withdrew, and began to administer such consolation as he thought the case admitted, saying,

“I was not aware of your presence, Cousin Marian, but am glad to find you alone. You will have heard all this unhappy story from Mr. Jones, and, I feel sure, will do all in your power for the relief and comfort of others, seeing, happily for you, how much less deeply your feelings are involved than the other members of your family.”

And that was the view Luke had taken of my position in this most unfortunate business! —*I*, whose whole happiness for life was wrecked by the folly and treachery of others! Ah! how little he could tell who was so coolly meting out to me my proper share in the affliction which had befallen us! He only thought of me as the half-sister of Claude, and no relative whatever of Lord Ramsay’s; therefore, it was supposed that my sorrow and regret must be proportionably less poignant than that of others who stood in nearer relationship to both. Perhaps it was as well for me that Luke, with his precise enunciation and formal manner of speaking, roused an incipient feeling of

anger in my heart; and rousing myself from my utter prostration of sorrow, I answered—

“ You are mistaken, Luke, Claude’s good name is as dear to me as to any other person in the family ; and the loss of it and himself also just as bitter to bear.”

“ No doubt, cousin, you feel it ; and that you should do so, so deeply, is much to the credit of your sisterly affection ; but of course the sense of his dereliction from the paths of duty and integrity must fall with more weight upon his mother and own sister than on you, good and amiable as you ever are in all family relations ; whilst——”

“ Oh ! don’t, Luke !—pray don’t go on in that way !”

“ What way do you mean, Cousin Marian ?” asked Luke, astonished ; and then adding, after a pause, seeing I made no answer, “ My intention was to console you, Marian, by bringing to your recollection how much lighter your affliction in this matter may be considered than that of others. No doubt you are deeply affected

both at the unhappy circumstances of the case, and the sad consequences which must ensue in the disruption of long-tried family friendship, such as that your sister has ever entertained for—for her——”

And as Luke seemed at a loss for some word by which to designate Flora Crofton, I broke in impatiently on his harangue, saying,

“ Family friendship, indeed!—and what have the Croftons ever been to me? And why do you suppose I am to bear the loss of them better than Juliet?”

“ You mistake me, cousin—no doubt the loss of the esteem of Mr. Crofton and his family must be grievously felt by you also; but I would venture to suggest—must it be borne by you to the same extent as by others? When Mr. Crofton recovers the just equilibrium of his mind, which has possibly been to some degree affected, he (and his sister I include, of course, your particular friend, the late Miss Crofton) will see a distinction between your relationship to the unhappy culprit in this family, and the nearer members of it and——”

Again I interrupted Luke with an impatient exclamation—

“Pray do not say any more about it at all, Luke—you cannot possibly tell the exact way anybody thinks or feels on any given point; and as nothing you say can alter facts or make me one degree less miserable, it is quite useless to go on talking about it at all.”

“Oh! very well. I am sure I had no intention of vexing you, cousin. I only wished to administer such consolation as I considered most appropriate,” said Luke, drawing himself up with offended dignity; and then a moment afterwards, apparently relenting, as he turned to depart, after groping for his hat in the dusky light, or rather darkness, he said with much kind feeling, “You must forgive me, dear cousin. I daresay I have been awkward in touching a sore wound, and have expressed myself ill. I only meant that any family disgrace would fall less on you than others; though I feel sure of your generous participation in all that sorrow; and at all events do remember

that by patient continuance in well-doing yourself, and bearing your share of the burden bravely, you may greatly contribute to lighten it to those on whom it may press more heavily; whilst no person, however near, can be justly condemned for the sin of another. Good night, and God bless you, dear cousin."

I was glad that he was gone. I always liked Luke so much better in his absence than in his presence. I could then appreciate his sterling good qualities without being irritated, as I too often was, at his manner of manifesting them. I had hardly recovered my glow of indignation, seconded by a sensation of remorse for the indulgence of that feeling against my poor, well-meaning, but most tedious cousin Luke, than I was startled by seeing Juliet come forward, out of the obscurity at the further end of the hall, and sitting down on the floor at my feet, she laid her head wearily, with a deep sigh, on my lap.

"How long have you been here, Juliet?" I asked.

"Only a little time. You were talking together, and as I knew it was no secret this time, I would not interrupt you ; but I felt you were displeased with your cousin for reminding you that only half the disgrace of Claude's conduct from your relationship would fall on you ; but I know, dear, you would not have thought of that yourself, for we have had all one and the same heart, us three—have not we?"

"You need not ask that, Juliet ; but Luke would not have said that, if he had known you were in the hall. Why did not you speak ?"

"I came in as usual ; and you were both talking, and soon after he went away. I suppose he will think badly of me now ?"

"Is that like Luke, Juliet ?"

"I do not know, One never seems to know what people really are," replied Juliet, despondingly; adding, "Who would have thought Claude so treacherous and ungrateful, and Flora so false and deceitful !"

"Depend upon it Luke's opinion of you will

in no way be altered by poor Claude's unhappy transgressions."

"You say *poor Claude*, Marian. Can you think there is any, the slightest excuse for his conduct, and the part he has been playing all along?" asked Juliet, hesitating as she spoke. And I answered,

"We will not judge him yet, though appearances are so terribly against him. He may have yielded—as I believe he has—to a sudden temptation, whilst he has struggled against it long; for, as Burns says, we know the ill that is done, and nothing of that which is resisted."

Juliet sat in silent meditation, which I did not care to interrupt, and then she said,

"Oh! what a deceptive letter that was he wrote to mamma, just as he was going off in that way; and to talk of going to meet Mr. Crofton."

"Juliet, I have thought of that letter—poor dear boy! I daresay it was all true—that he intended to go to town and see him, possibly intending either to tell Mr. Crofton the real

state of the case, or else to make some excuse to stay away till after the wedding. He was, I feel sure, flying from danger, or intending to do so, when he wrote that letter to your mother."

"Then you mean to cast all the blame on Flora—poor Flora?" said Juliet.

I remained silent.

"That is hardly fair, Marian," urged Juliet, after a pause.

"Fair or not, that is my impression, Juliet. I do not assert that it *is* so, but I firmly believe that it was Flora led Claude on, and he was not so much to blame as her. I believe she liked him in her way, and preferred him in her heart to Lord Ramsay, of whom she was slightly afraid."

Juliet made a little dissenting noise, which I answered.

"I do not mean afraid in the usual sense; but she feared his preference for all good and sensible things and pursuits, would interfere with the sort of life she would have liked to have led



as his wife ; and yet she coveted the position, on account of its many advantages ; and then, liking Claude best, and thrown so much together as they unavoidably were——Oh ! well, I need not say more on this wretched subject, but it is plain enough to see how it all came about. And now there is nothing henceforth but misery for us all—in both families!" I exclaimed, passionately, as the sense of my own peculiar wrongs swept over my mind, and overturned all my efforts at composure. Juliet lifted her head in surprise at my vehemence, whilst she observed,

"It is indeed very sad, and very shocking, especially for our poor cousin, Lord Ramsay ; but I do not see why you and I, or any one, need be unhappy all our lives about it. I dare-say, in a little time we shall not feel so unhappy, although I have just said and thought foolish things about it, but, after all, no doubt that is because just now, the idea and the shock of hearing it is so great ; but in time that feeling will wear off, and I suppose things will go on

just as usual," said she, regaining something of her natural composure of mind and manner.

I did not contradict her, poor girl! It was well for her that in spite of her present distress, which I knew to be very great, she could sensibly find comfort in looking forward. To me all was blank, the present and the future. I could take no comfort in either. The one recurring thought was, would Mr. Crofton come and see me again, and when and where? I knew he could not enter the house where Claude and Claude's mother lived. Perhaps he would write to me in preference. If so, what could he say? Was I indeed doomed to suffer so heavily for my brother's errors?

CHAPTER VI.

FOR a day or two all was excitement at the old home—I mean, of course, as to feeling, for nothing could be quieter and more uneventful than our daily life there. Mrs. Markham bewailed her son's rash step quite passionately for her. It was, as she said truly, the utter ruin of every prospect in life for him. She knew our neighbour at the Hall too well to hope there would be any relenting or forgiveness for the offending young couple. Claude's was such an aggravated case (to all appearance) of treachery and ingratitude, whilst Flora's savoured so strongly of heartless levity and deceit, that it was no wonder there should be small excuse made for them in their own immediate families. Everyone must feel the strong-

est commiseration for Lord Ramsay; and as Miss Alethea was equally the aunt of both parties, her extreme indignation fell with unabated severity on her erring nephew Claude. It was quite clear he would never find an advocate in the aunt he used laughingly to call "The Honourable Alethea."

To mark as strongly as possible her sense of his misconduct, and of her sympathy and regard for her other nephew, she set herself to compose a letter to Lord Ramsay, in which she might fully express her abhorrence of the conduct which had deprived him of his once loved and promised bride, and solemnly declaring her resolution never more to acknowledge Claude Markham as her nephew, or to notice or assist him in any way—adding, if ever her sister was weak enough to relent and see him and his wife at her house, that would be the last day of her remaining in it. She wound up with professions of affectionate regard for himself, and the unbounded esteem she must ever entertain for his many high and excellent qualities.



This letter was quite a composition, and took some days to bring to perfection, for Miss Ramsay's natural style of writing was hurried and concise—far more, I thought, to be admired than this elaborate epistle, which was written and corrected and re-written before it had obtained that high pitch of perfection she considered necessary on such an occasion. I was favoured with some of the readings apart from the rest of the family, for she said she looked on me as having so much less interest in the whole affair than either her sister or Juliet, that she elected me to hear her letter in preference to either of them.

“It would not do to tell Charlotte exactly how horribly I think Claude has behaved, and that nothing will ever induce me to look at him again, with his handsome deceitful face and smooth tongue. She is cut up enough about him as it is, and I have said pretty clearly what my opinion is, but I could not rest under the idea that my nephew, Lord Ramsay, whom I look upon much more in that light than I ever

did that plausible Master Claud!—well, I should not like Ramsay to fancy I took his part in any way, as, living here with his mother, he might fancy, and it is for that reason I am writing this letter, which I am going to read to you."

I had no spirit to resist Miss Ramsay's vehemence on the subject, or power to defend or shield my poor Claude from the consequences of his most disastrous step. I was almost broken-hearted when I thought of all the misery that must result from it. There was nothing openly to be said or urged in extenuation of his fault. To Juliet alone I had confided my own private opinion of the transaction, but it *might* not be a correct one; still, it was the view to which I adhered in my own mind.

Mr. Jones came to see Mrs. Markham every day. His visits were the only events that seemed to cheer and enliven the poor woman. At that dreary period Juliet had also consolatory interviews with Luke Dillon, and little Miss Jones ventured to offer her little mite of

consolation to us all. Her intentions were most kind, but as her ideas of things in general were simple in the extreme, and her experience equally limited, her opinions on the subject of our sorrow availed but little in the way she desired. One day I heard her say to Mrs. Markham—

“Dear me, I did hope to hear you had heard from the young couple by this time. What a pity, I was saying to my brother only yesterday, that they should have set off in that way. Only young people are so heedless—we old ones must not judge them by our standard. They meant well, I daresay; and to save Mr. Crofton. But when they found they had changed their minds—or rather, Miss Flora had, what a pity not to say so, and wait a little patiently. But don’t be so cast down, my dear Mrs. Markham, I am sure it will all come right soon. Mr. Crofton will want his daughter back, and fond as he always was of your dear son, won’t he welcome him too! Oh! there will be rejoicings then! It makes my heart quite light to think of it all.”

Mrs. Markham's reply was nearer the true state of things, I feared—

"I am sure you wish us all well, Miss Jones; but I know Mr. Crofton better than you do. He has been deceived, and he will never forgive either his daughter or my son; and my poor Claude's prospects are hopelessly ruined, besides having made an enemy of his cousin, Lord Ramsay, the only person he could have looked to help him on in the world. What will become of him I cannot tell!"

It was grievous to hear my step-mother's sorrowful wailings. I had never known before how tenderly she had loved her only son; and I felt more drawn towards her than at any previous period of my life. I saw through the intense worldly selfishness of Miss Ramsay, who, whilst clinging to the asylum afforded by her sister's house, was only eager to denounce her son, in the hope of propitiating the regard of the man he had injured, and whose position in life made his connexion and countenance so far more desirable to her.

Day after day passed, and I looked for some sight or sign of, or from Mr. Crofton, according to his promise. I knew how scrupulously exact he ever was in the fulfilment of every—even the most trifling engagement he entered into, so I thought he would never leave the place without doing as he had said he would. Feeling persuaded that he would not call at our house, I often went out into the grounds, both morning and evening, wandering through all the wet and dreary paths where I thought it possible he might come to bid me farewell—for ever, probably!

This occupation and expectation was a source of interest to me whilst it lasted. But it came rudely to an end at last. One chilly, drizzling afternoon I had wandered rather further than usual, when I saw through the falling mist (rather than rain) a tall, strongly-built stranger man coming towards me. As he approached, he eyed me closely, and then asked, touching his hat respectfully,

“Pray, ma’am, may I take the liberty of

asking are you Miss Markham?—I mean the eldest?"

"Yes," I answered; and as we were on debatable ground, I asked, "Are you coming up to the Manor-house?"

"I was—to ask to see you, and give you a note."

"I don't think I know you," I said, looking at the man rather suspiciously, for though by no means repulsive, his countenance was coarse and unprepossessing. Still, I fancied there was a kind of rough honesty in it, though mingled with considerable self-sufficiency and assurance. He answered with perfect ease and independence of manner—

"I daresay not—I don't come in the way of ladies often; but I have seen your sister, as she was oftener at our place of late, since I have had more to do there. My name is John Forest."

I winced a little at hearing that name, for it was one that my poor Claude had made unpleasantly familiar to me. I knew, however,

that Mr. Crofton had always looked upon him as an honest and trustworthy servant; though why he should have chosen to have sent him to me, I could not imagine. My heart was, however, too heavy for much speculation—all I hoped was, the note of which he said he was the bearer might be the harbinger of his own coming; and it still yearned for another sight and sound of that much-loved face and voice. It was with a species of sick longing, that seemed as if it could not brook a farther disappointment, so I made sure that the master would soon appear, as well as the servant, and I asked,

“ You have a note, or message for me ? ”

“ Both, Miss Markham,” answered the man, with a sort of forced civility, at the same time opening a pocket-book, and looking for some paper therein ; whilst he continued speaking, as I watched him impatiently.

“ I am commissioned to let you know there will be no prosecution.”

No prosecution ! What could he mean ? I felt my face flush indignantly, as I looked up in

his great rugged face. I said, "I do not understand you, Mr. Forest!"

"I thought you might have heard, Miss Markham—but it is more my affair than Mr. Crofton's—the money that is—is missing, I won't say taken, was in my charge, and being so I am clearly the person accountable for it; now having delivered it into Mr. Claude's hands, and finding it has never been paid into the bank, it behoves me to inquire how the young gentleman has disposed of it."

I quite gasped with horror, as I remembered Claude's carelessness the very evening I had last seen him, and could only articulate,

"He mentioned that money to me; it was safe in the breast-pocket of his overcoat when he came home for the last time; he was then, he said, going to pay it into the bank at Thorpe."

"Ay! he said many things he never did, and that was one of them! As I am a living man, Miss Markham, that money never reached its destination. I gave it into his hands, and he left it behind him once; and the second time he



came, he gathered several of his things together to take with him, when he made that awful flitting—well ! he no doubt took the money also with him. Perhaps it might have been a mistake, for he was that careless ! he might have done it. However, as I am in sole trust down yonder now, I was about to send after the young gentleman, and employ a detective to find him out and get the money back, for I am accountable to my master for it !”

“Oh, you could not be so cruel, Mr Forest ; you may not like or understand my poor brother, but you can never for one moment believe him so lost to every feeling of honour, of honesty, of——”

I was suddenly stopped and brought back to painful recollection, by observing the sudden strange expression in the man’s countenance, as he stood tall and erect before me; there was a sort of grim irony depicted on his features, as he looked keenly down on me through his half closed but twinkling eyes, as if he half enjoyed the manifest discomfiture under which I was

suffering. He only cleared his throat significantly and repeated after me,

“Honour!—humph; honesty!—humph. Well, perhaps the less said about them the better. His master’s daughter was more valuable than his master’s money; and as he helped himself to one, and she all but another man’s wife, how could one be so sure he would not take the other?”

I felt hot with shame and anger, even in the chill of that cold winter evening, as I heard the words of the insolent dependant; and though my inmost heart denied the truth of every word he spoke, I knew he only said what he believed to be the barren fact, and he had not delicacy enough to clothe his opinion in more acceptable words. Then the ‘no prosecution’ clause came back upon my recollection with startling distinctness, so, rallying all my energies, and screwing up my courage, I confronted Mr. John Forest with the simple inquiry,

“Do you mean to say that you have had any intention of prosecuting Mr. Claude Markham?”

The man nodded in reply, "Yes, that's just it—I *had*—and now I *haven't*. Mr. Crofton says he is satisfied, though I can't say that I am; and he says the money is his, and not mine; and if he chooses to abide by the loss of it, that is his concern, not mine—so there is an end of it."

"And did Mr. Crofton send you to tell me this?"

"In part he did, in part he didn't—but I can't mince up things fine and delicate to suit ladies' tastes. I declared in Thorpe at the Bank, and in the Market, that I'd prosecute the young gentleman that had played me such a trick, and made away with the money I had delivered to him to pay into t'Bank. Mr. Crofton thinks you may have heard of it, and your mamma, or some of them up there—so he says, go tell Miss Markham herself, no harm shall come of the missing money—that means 'no prosecution'; and says he, give her that note; so now, ma'am, that's all my commission. You understand, 'no prosecution'?"

“I do,” I said briefly; whilst I thought “and no thanks to you!” for I saw the spiteful, envious man would have delighted in dragging my poor Claude’s name even more deeply through the mire than it had been before. It was sorrowful enough as it was, and I dared not ask myself what had become of the missing money. Still I felt grateful, in the midst of all my trouble and sorrow, to the thoughtful care for my peace of mind which made Mr. Crofton send the man himself to reassure my mind, should I have chanced to have heard of this fresh cause of misery. No doubt both Mr. Jones and his sister had done so, but it was a subject they would not venture to broach, and with Mr. Crofton himself they had no acquaintance or communication. I felt sure also the whole affair as regarded the money would be too hateful for Mr. Crofton to speak of himself to me, and therefore he had sent Forest with his note and the information he had brought.

“You have nothing more, I suppose, to say to me?” I asked coldly of the man, who stood



still waiting after he had delivered his note, whilst I clutched my treasure impatiently, anxious to get rid of him, and run home as fast as I could, that I might be able to read as well as feel the what comfort it might convey to me.

“ Nothing particular, Miss Markham, only when Mr. Crofton went away yesterday morning he said I might take it either that afternoon or this ; and I was busy, so waited till to-day, and hope you will find it the same.”

He then turned away, and I did the same. All the words that presented themselves to me were “ Gone ! gone ! gone !” and a sense of desolation crept over me, more intense than I had ever before experienced in my whole life. Still, there was the paper which my fingers enclosed so tightly, as if to find hope and assurance from the contact. He might yet be coming back, for it was evident he had some thought, some care, still for me. But yet he had given me up for my brother’s fault. As he had said himself, the innocent must suffer for the guilty.

I was in my own room at last ; the fire and

candles burnt brightly ; everything looked cheerful and homelike, coming out of that dark, dreary night without. But there was a depth of despondency within my heart that no outward show of comfort could reach or relieve. I sat down, and taking out my note (it was a long one) with painful deliberation, read :—

“ I write to you, Marian, because I could not bring myself to see you again. I cannot *say* good-bye to you, so, coward as I am, I do so in this way. If we *must* part, and you know a dire necessity compels us, the more briefly it is accomplished the better. I can say nothing to you that you do not already know. To write of grief, or sorrow, or regret, is worse than foolish—it is useless. Let us each take up our burden and bear it as best we may. You are much younger than I am, in years, Marian, and you are far younger in heart. You may, therefore, hope for another future—a brighter one, I trust, may still be yours, and if I hear that you are happy I shall be glad. Let us be thankful I had not made you my own when *this* came upon us !

"I know my own infirmity of mood, and it would not have brooked the trial. I might have made you unhappy. Yes, sweet, gentle Marian, I should have distrusted even *you*—at times, I mean—my better angel might have prevailed at others; but the wounds I thought closed for ever have been so rudely reopened, that no earthly power can ever heal them again. Feeling as I do, I could never make any woman happy, and none have I desired save yourself; and between you and me there is indeed a great gulf fixed—nothing can ever span it. You must feel all this as sensibly as I do. With none of your name can I ever hold intercourse again. You must see it ought to be so, and we are powerless to reverse the stern decree.

"Do not fear that I cherish any feelings of implacability or vengeance against the guilty authors of all this misery; they are henceforth to me as though they had never been. They are wiped out of my recognition in every possible way. I shall never name, or speak, or if possible think of them again. My world and theirs is

as wide apart as if we inhabited separate spheres. They need fear no discovery or molestation on my part ; they are less than nothing to me. I tell you this as plainly as I can, Marian ; because, in your heart of sisterly affection you might indulge in some dream of future forgiveness, future reconciliation. You may dismiss it at once and for ever ; I have given *you up*, and that is a sure sign and pledge of what I am capable, and you may think you have had an escape from one so fixed in his determination, be it for good or evil. I am going away from your neighbourhood, and I quit it with a heart almost as sore as when I entered it. Well ! I must now take up my burden and carry it to my life's end, as contentedly as I can. Would that I could lighten yours, my poor girl ! but I know yours is not a disposition to be always sorrowful. I have lingered over my last words, but I must end them now. My last and earnest request is, to be as happy as you can ; it is not for me to teach you *how*, though I have taught you a few things in the days that are past. May God bless you ever !

CHAPTER VII.

HOW that winter passed away I can never tell—it seemed one long dream of sadness and sorrow. After the letter I have just mentioned, all trace of my former friends seemed to vanish from the earth—Mr. Crofton, Mary, Flora, all entirely disappeared! We saw nothing, we heard nothing of or from them. How strange it was! the once happy and united family at the Hall, now all dispersed—removed alike from each other and their old home! For weeks and weeks, Mrs. Markham kept looking out for a letter from Claude, but none came. Juliet confided to me her hope that Flora, once so dear a friend, and now so near a relative, might at least have written to her.

“They might have been afraid to write to

"mamma," said she one day to me, "but Flora might have sent me a letter, or at least Claude might have written to you."

I thought so too, but I felt at the same time, that his entire silence towards his family showed sufficiently how deeply he felt the disgrace of the step he had taken ; he had nothing to urge in extenuation of it, so he held his peace. It would be tedious and wearisome were I to enter into any description of my state of mind at that time. I can only say, everything there seemed unbroken and broken up.

The very current of my happiest thoughts and recollections turned into waters of bitterness. All the pursuits I had formerly delighted in were become so many spectres in my path, to be avoided and put aside, each bringing in its turn sharp stinging recollections of the time when I had first engaged in them, and at whose suggestion ; whilst encouraged by that fine discriminating taste to which I had so long looked for direction and approval. All gone ! all swept away, leaving no trace behind, except in those sorrow-

ful scars so deeply indented in my heart of hearts ; known only to myself, and unsuspected by all around. Still, as I have said, I had a certain strength of body and elasticity of mind that prevented my entirely giving way, or sinking under my bitter and grievous disappointment. It was a comfort that the secret of it rested with myself ; and I felt very thankful that it could never form a subject of discussion amongst my friends (or foes) as might be. Not that I much believed in the existence of the latter.

My step-mother claimed a great deal of my time and attention during that winter. She was ill and unhappy. Juliet was much taken up with her own pursuits, and it was very clear that Luke Dillon was beginning to open his eyes to my young sister's many good qualities, and their intimate connection with his own comfort in his parish ; and also to perceive that she was just the companion he required to lighten his solitude, and minister to his happiness, in bestowing that ready sympathy and affection he had sought elsewhere in vain.

All this seemed slowly to dawn upon Luke's mind as the course of another year went round, though he said nothing to the new object of his regard. Still he let me know by degrees the change that was coming over the spirit of his dream—this time to become a reality, and no longer a baseless vision. He had consoled and comforted Juliet in the time of family sorrow, and in so doing had been led to perceive the great influence he had over her mind. She, so difficult to persuade in ordinary cases, was, he began to see, malleable as wax in his hands. No wonder, then, when he had opportunity, and was disengaged enough in thought to make this discovery, that it wrought with wonder-working power on his hitherto unrequited affections.

I soon perceived with pleasure a growing devotion, as well as deference, in his manner to Juliet, that showed he was endeavouring to woo and win her in a becoming spirit. As the sweet spring-time of that year dawned, the one great event in Juliet's simple lifetime came to a

crisis. Luke Dillon asked her to become his wife. His proposal was received very differently then, by Juliet's mother, to what it would have been a year or two ago, when she had much higher designs for her daughter's settlement in life. Mrs. Markham did not certainly express any strong satisfaction or great delight at the prospect of having Luke Dillon for a son-in-law, but she made no objection to his proposals, and gave a calm consent.

She had taken it into her head that all the neighbourhood, it was certainly not a very extensive one, but, such as it was, she fancied it had looked coolly upon her since her son's unfortunate escapade. I do not think it was so in general, though the Eltons had never been very cordial since. They resented the double insult to themselves in having made their house the scene of the catastrophe, whilst their daughter Carrie had been used as a sort of blind to Claude's real designs (as they supposed) in going there, and her affections heartlessly trifled with and betrayed. That was a fresh

charge added to the many which served to swell the sum of my poor Claude's iniquities in that most unhappy affair.

The young curate, Cecil Elton, was no longer in that position ; he was happily translated into a good living, on the strength of which he had again proposed, but to a different lady and with different success; and was at that time a married man, with a nice pretty young wife, and was then living in a comfortable, pleasant rectory, not many miles distant from Thorpe.

Thus it happened Mrs. Markham gave her consent, coldly enough, but without any hesitation, when Juliet and Luke asked it. She had no doubt seen what was impending for some time, and perhaps felt Juliet would in any case take her own way. She was therefore permitted to do so without opposition, though Mrs. Markham observed to me, the day the proposal had been made and accepted,

"They will be terribly poor, but there is no use in advising Juliet on any subject. She has long made up her mind, I believe, to become

Mrs. Dillon, and I can't prevent her. I know no harm of your cousin. On the contrary, I believe he is a most worthy good young man; but he is the last I should have fancied, if he had proposed to me."

I hardly wondered at her saying so, but would not endorse the sentiment to my cousin's detriment, so I only said,

"I think Juliet is quite devoted to the sort of life she will lead as Luke's wife, and I dare-say they will be very happy together, and they seem much attached."

Mrs. Markham gave a little short laugh.

"Everybody is supposed to be *much attached* when they take it into their heads to marry, and then they find out their mistake afterwards."

I knew what she was thinking of, and observed,

"Juliet and Luke must be pretty well acquainted by this time, and there is nothing but affection to induce them to marry."

"Indeed no—very little besides love to live on. It is a very poor Rectory—about four

hundred a year, I believe—riches, no doubt, to your poor grandfather's curate, but not much for *my* daughter. Well, things have always gone cross with me in the world, so I must take this even like the rest. If it had not been for that unhappy business, I might have got Mr. Crofton to have helped them in some way, for he seemed to like your cousin Luke so much; but everything is at an end now, though my poor boy *is* married to his daughter."

That recollection brought on a fit of weeping, and what with that and the excitement, little as she had shown it, at hearing of Juliet's engagement, poor Mrs. Markham worked herself into a paroxysm of grief that was sad to behold, and difficult to control. She talked to me much more freely at all times than to her sister of past events, for Miss Ramsay's view of things being much opposed to her sister's, they seldom broached the subject without some uncomfortable words between them. Miss Ramsay, having more command of her temper, was generally the one to give way; but these con-

stant collisions between the two sisters made their residence together less pleasant than it had been once. Still, they contrived to get on pretty well when they could keep clear of all irritating subjects; and as I believe they were tolerably of one mind in respect to Juliet's prospects, it happily was no fresh bone of contention between them. Juliet announced her intentions to her aunt in her own way, saying,

"I am come to tell you, Aunt Alethea, that I am going to be married."

"Indeed!—well, I hope you will be happy."

"You don't ask who it is to, aunt."

"No need for that, I think. It must be either Mr. Dillon or Mr. Jones. There is no one else comes here oftener than once a year; so I suppose, as Mr. Dillon is the youngest, you have chosen him."

"As if there was no other difference between them! But that's all nonsense, I know, and I hope, aunt, you will like Luke for a nephew."

"I don't think my liking or disliking will make much difference."

"But I hope you will 'be kind when he next comes, and receive him as—as one of the family, please, aunt?" said poor Juliet, with more of gentle pleading in her voice than was habitual to her very self-sufficing nature; but she was for the time softened and subdued by the new and happy prospects that were giving a fresh interest to her young life, and she evidently feared the brusquerie of Miss Ramsay's manner might be unpleasantly manifested to Luke in his new position. The reply was rather discouraging—

"I have known your Mr. Luke rather too long now to adopt a new manner with him. I daresay he will be quite satisfied with my old one. You will be sweet enough upon him for all the rest of the family, and if he is to be one of us, the sooner he sees us as we naturally are the better."

"I did not mean that," said Juliet, relapsing into her usual indifferent tone; "but we shall do very well, I daresay."

"Of course we shall," replied her aunt, per-

versely. "What is there to prevent us?—and may I ask when this grand marriage is to come off?"

Juliet paused for a moment, and then she said—

"Aunt, do you remember what you said about gay weddings a long, long time ago?"

"Not I."

"Well, you and I were agreed, then, that the people chiefly concerned, especially the man, would rather dispense with the gaiety and company, and all that, so please let me have my own way in this, if mamma will allow it, and ask no one here, and have no party, and let Luke and me be as quietly married as we like."

"I shall make no opposition to that, nor will your mother, I fancy. All our own family are estranged by your brother's conduct, and so are our nearest friends and neighbours; so I don't know who there would be to ask, except a clerical friend or two of Mr. Dillon's, who have occasionally changed duties with him. There is, to be sure, the family lawyer, Mr. Jackson,

and his family at Thorpe, and perhaps Mr. and Miss Jones, so I don't think you need be afraid of your wedding being too well furnished with guests."

"No," replied Juliet, in a rather hurt and mortified tone; "I see there is not much choice for me on the occasion; but Luke and I shall be all the better pleased at the absence of the pomps and vanities of the world; though it seems we shall not have to renounce them."

"Well, well, so long as you are satisfied what does it signify? You are the person going to be married, not me, thank goodness!" And there the discussion ended.

Juliet found her fears as to her approaching marriage being made an excuse for assembling as large a party as circumstances permitted, and perhaps inviting some of the members of her mother's family whom she had never seen, to do honour to the occasion, were utterly groundless. She and Luke were to be allowed to go their own way, as quietly as either of them could desire.

I do not know what was Luke's opinion on the subject, but I fancy my sister Juliet felt a little hurt, if not disappointed, about it all. It was not that she was the least insincere in what she advanced respecting her wish for a quiet wedding, but she would no doubt have been (in her inmost heart) better pleased had this desire not been quite so general, so entirely taken as a matter of course—had there been, in fact, more wish expressed to do all honour to the occasion, or rather to him who was about to become her husband.

It was very evident that Luke Dillon was considered too poor a match by Miss Ramsay for the event to be celebrated otherwise than in the quietest, most unostentatious way possible. What was our surprise, then, a few weeks after, when we were in the midst of our humble preparations for the coming event, making such little additions to the furniture and general fitting up of the modest rooms in the old Rectory, and Juliet and I, with the assistance of a village needlewoman, working assiduously

at her plain, but serviceable and abundant trousseau, to be summoned from our occupation to receive a visit from the Dean and his wife, who, we were told, waited to see us in the drawing-room. It was quite an event to us then, although they had both called at the Manor-house since the unhappy event which had estranged them ; but their visits had become so rare, that we were certainly not expecting to see them at that time, much less to find they were come to offer cordial and friendly congratulations on the approaching marriage ; and, more still, to find the Dean was proffering his services on the occasion, speaking, at the same time, in the highest and most satisfactory terms of Luke himself, and paying delicate little compliments to Juliet, as the chosen companion of so excellent a man.

It was something quite new to Mrs. Markham to think either of Luke Dillon or even of Juliet as objects of such commendation ; it was quite out of Mrs. Markham's province to bestow either high praise or blame upon Luke and his pur-

suits—she believed them on the whole to be praiseworthy, though carried a point or two beyond what was required in his clerical capacity; but that she attributed rather to his want of *savoir faire*, and isolation in a dull country parish. She was therefore more disposed to excuse his eccentricities than approve of them. As for Juliet, her devotion to the same calling had long been to her mother a source of angry disappointment and regret. Her employments were tolerated because it was found impossible to control or direct them in such a course as would have been more suitable to Mrs. Markham's own taste and inclinations. So she rather took merit to herself for not thwarting her daughter in the line of conduct that pleased her best, but were so much opposed to her own ways and habits of thinking. To hear Juliet, therefore, applauded and elevated on a pedestal of praise for her untiring works of charity and kindness, struck Mrs. Markham as something so strange and uncalled for, that she sat almost dumb, listening to the Dean in silent astonish-

mént. Her feelings were so strongly depicted on her countenance, that it was impossible to look at her without being amused. I hoped, however, it might induce my step-mother to look with more complacency on approaching events.

Mrs. Elton, too, was particularly amiable and kind in every way. They seemed determined to show attention to Juliet as the intended wife of Luke Dillon. It was evident he stood very high in the estimation of the Dean. It was pleasant to see how Juliet's face lightened and brightened under such genial influences ; it was far more grateful to her to hear the praises of her betrothed than listen to any pleasant speeches on her own account. There never was a girl freer from all the littleness of vanity than Juliet Markham, or one so entirely capable of self-forgetfulness. Mrs. Elton entered with almost motherly kindness into all the little details she could gather of Juliet's future *ménage*, and what changes they were about to make in the Parsonage; and then she went on to ask her

about the time of her marriage, and whether any day was yet fixed for the wedding, and then in some way contrived to let her know that Carrie would be so pleased to be one of her bridesmaids. Juliet's cool pale cheek flushed a little at this intimation, though it was evident she was flattered by it; but she replied in a low voice she did not think she was going to have any, except her sister.

"Then let Carrie come," said kind Mrs. Elton, breaking through the ice of reserve that had of late separated the two families, adding, "The poor child will be so glad, if you will have her in the quietest way. No new dresses or anything, but the pleasure of the occasion. She is alone, too, for you know my eldest daughter Mary was married last year, and the other is staying with her. We have all been there, making a long absence altogether; and then the first news we heard on our return was this intended wedding, which pleased us all so much, and Carrie said, 'How I should like to be Juliet Markham's bridesmaid, if she will have me.'"

Happily, whilst Juliet was hesitating as to what she ought to say and do on the occasion, Miss Ramsay overheard, and came promptly to her niece's assistance, assuring Mrs. Elton that they should all be delighted to see Miss Carrie, and hoped the whole party at the Deanery would also look in upon them after the wedding that morning, though it seemed a very dull affair to ask any one to, Juliet herself having expressed a wish that everything should be of the quietest description.

"I understand," said Mrs. Elton, good-naturedly nodding her head. "We all know what the bridegroom's wish is likely to be, and how quiet and unostentatious all his ways and habits are, so I can easily comprehend your niece's desire to accommodate all her proceedings to his tastes; but we should all like to do him and her all honour on the occasion, if convenient and agreeable to you and Mrs. Markham. We would meet the wedding party in the church, and return home from thence."

It may be supposed that plan was not to be

allowed in any way, though it was evidently the one the Eltons had come to propose. Mrs. Markham was really glad to be on friendly terms again, and was not displeased to find that her future son-in-law was not quite such a cypher in the estimation of the higher clerical world as he was in her own. It was therefore settled that Dean Elton was to marry Luke and Juliet, and all his family were cordially invited to take part in the quiet ceremony—it being understood that Carrie was to be my fellow-bridesmaid on the occasion.

CHAPTER VIII.

IT was a beautiful summer morning late in June when we all assembled in our small parish church to witness the marriage of Luke Dillon and Juliet Markham. It was a very quiet wedding, though rather more numerously attended than we had expected. It was a pretty wedding, and a pleasant one also. There was joy throughout the whole village, and people came, too, from the hamlets round, for all felt and testified a personal interest in the union of these two, who had long lived and ministered amongst them, from old to young. There seemed but one feeling about the young pair who were that day united—that they were “made for each other.” There was, indeed, but one heart between them—one object in life

—one hope in eternity. It was not a grand marriage, certainly, but it was a very good one, in the best sense of the expression ; so there were not wanting smiles and bright faces, and hearty cordial congratulations, and bright wishes. The bride's path was literally strewn with roses in that her outset into married life ; for though there had been no suggestion of the kind, every child, and many of the young people besides, brought their little humble offering of flowers to cast at the bride's feet, and every bouquet was bright with sweet summer roses.

How happy Juliet looked that day, and quite pretty in her white bridal dress, her young face softened by an unwonted glow of diffidence, contending with its bright hopefulness, as her eyes glanced on so many of her humble and devoted friends met together to wish her “God speed” on her new life’s journey ! It was just such a wedding-party as she would have chosen ; and she was made quite happy by Luke’s whispering to her as he led her away—his own then—that there would be open house

for all who cared to call that day at the Parsonage. The old housekeeper there had orders to turn none away, but to entertain all who came.

Our friends of high degree were very few that day, the Eltons being the principal amongst them. The Joneses, of course, were invited, and came, and the family lawyer from Thorpe, Mr. Jackson, with his wife and daughter—an extremely pretty girl, by the way—and there was a young curate friend of Luke's, who stood beside him as best man, and another clerical acquaintance, with a young wife, whose thoughts seemed to run so much upon an absent baby, that she had none to spare for anything present. And that, I think, was about the sum total of our guests; but there was much sociability and perfect ease amongst us, whilst the *déjeuner* was represented by a simple and substantial luncheon, such as our homely and reduced establishment could furnish, with much more ease and satisfaction both to the consumers and purveyors than a lighter and more *recherché* repast.

Mrs. Markham bore it all with tolerable equanimity, though it was evident it was a day of mortification to her in many ways, but she struggled to make the best of it. I could enter into some of her feelings of bitter regret that day (not at the absence of fine friends or a sumptuous entertainment), but that there was no Claude present—no brother to give his sister away—no Croftons to wish her joy, and make our interests their own on such an occasion. There was a dreary blank, which perhaps fell with more weight on my heart than even on that of the bereaved mother. Still, the principal people were happy that day. And Luke and Juliet were going to make a little tour abroad. Such an idea had never been contemplated by them until a very short time before. Their modest finances being all insufficient to hold out such a vision of happiness as in any way attainable.

Everything, however, was new to Juliet. She had gone nowhere from home, so Luke had made a little plan of taking her to the

most accessible of the lakes, and showing her as much of that lovely locality as his slender means would permit. Juliet had entered eagerly into this intention, and only stipulated that he should not spend too much in his anxiety to give her pleasure at that time; so the young betrothed pair had made their little calculations as soberly as two old people who might have been married these twenty years; and then, when they had decided what they could afford to do, and what they could not, all their modest plan of pleasure was duly sketched out, and very happy was Juliet in the prospect, and Luke became as natural and cheerful as when he had climbed the cherry-tree years ago to give us his choicest fruit. But all that had been most unexpectedly changed, and a far grander, more extensive plan since substituted in its place.

The mover in this new scheme, but the last person I should have dreamt of, was no other than Mr. Crofton himself. Not a word had been heard of him, at least to our knowledge,

since he had left the neighbourhood, about a year and a half ago, till two or three weeks before Luke's marriage; and then, to his surprise, came a short note from his former friend and patron, kindly congratulating him on the choice he had made of a wife, and wishing him a long continuance of all joy. He then expressed his desire to offer some little token of his regard as a wedding gift, briefly but earnestly begging his acceptance of a note to a considerable amount, which was enclosed, to enable him to select whatever he might consider most desirable. Luke therefore elected to devote part of his friend's present to meet the expenses of such a tour as would delight Juliet and himself no less, leaving the rest to be considered at leisure.

Very little was said about this donation, but all deeply felt the kindly thought and remembrance that prompted it. Not a word about himself or his whereabouts did Mr. Crofton say; but the note was written on foreign paper, and there was no date. Possi-

bly that was omitted to avoid all risk of thanks on Luke's part. He was told by John Forest, who delivered it into Luke's own hands, that it came with several other papers and letters from Mr. Crofton's bankers in London; that he had also heard from his master, who gave directions as to the delivery of Mr. Dillon's letter; that he knew nothing of where Mr. Crofton might be, all his letters and orders came from his agent in town.

Thus it was that Juliet received the greatest boon that I believe could have been conferred upon her at that time. To cross the water, and in the society of Luke, her own husband, was, indeed, practical as all Juliet's notions were in general, a perfect dream of felicity. And so she departed, to try whether the realization at all equalled her visions, and if the few letters we received from her as well as Luke, in the course of their travels, could be depended on, we might be gratified in finding there had been no falling off in any of their speculations when brought to the test.

I was feeling rather lonely when all was over, Juliet and her husband departed, and the last wedding guests in the person of the Eltons about to take their leave. It was then Mrs. Elton, looking kindly in my face, said,

“There must always be some sore hearts on these merry days, I fear; and you will miss your sister at first, but you will soon have her back and settled as near as you can desire; but in the meantime, till you get a little used to the change, suppose you come and see us? It will really be a kindness to Carrie (for both her sisters are away); so do say you will come the first day you can to the Deanery, and stay as long as you can be spared.”

I was hesitating as to whether I could accept this invitation, when my step-mother, hearing what was in debate, decided it at once, saying,

“Oh, do go, Marian, the change will be good for you; you have been working so hard for Juliet these last few weeks, and indeed you have so little pleasure or amusement now, that I shall be quite glad for you to go, so you had

better fix a day, and if it is fine I will drive over with you myself."

Mrs. Markham had softened considerably towards me for the last two years, and we were now on very comfortable terms. I believe she was glad I should have the opportunity of going out once more, and she also welcomed the idea of renewing her acquaintance at the Deanery, so she seconded Mrs. Elton's invitation by thus urging me to go.

"Can you really spare me?" I asked.

"Well, I daresay Alethea and I can get on pretty well for a time. We are not used to anything very lively at any time, so now you have the opportunity, I advise you to embrace it."

So it was all settled, and a few days after Juliet's departure I took mine also for the Deanery. It was during that time I became well acquainted with Carrie Elton. We did not exchange any particular confidences, but I felt sure she had loved poor Claude dearly, and I felt the more indignant when I thought of Flora,

and the infinitude of misery her selfish conduct had brought on so many. It seldom occurred to me to blame *him*, I felt so sure he had been helplessly entangled, and unable to resist. I do not say I was at all right in so thinking, nevertheless I could not help it. As to the missing money, I always thought it had been lost by Claude that night upon the road, and possibly some one had found the parcel and appropriated the contents. It never occurred to me then to think that if it had been so my brother must have been aware of the loss when he arrived at the Deanery, and ought to have instituted instant inquiries respecting it. I often looked round the place, and felt as though I should have liked to have inquired—even of the inanimate objects there—into various things that might have transpired in that last visit of Claude's, and also of Flora Crofton's, so as to give some little clue as to the means and manner in which she had effected her strange purpose. It was evidently a tabooed subject there, and the last anyone would have entered

upon to me. I only made my little surmises in regard to Carrie's feeling towards my brother, not from any mention of him, but from inferences drawn from little trifling things she mentioned when referring to past times, and scenes that were gone, and to which I felt it was Claude's presence and participation had given the interest and the charm.

A day or two before I left, Miss Clifford came on a visit, and it was from her I first heard the least allusion to the story of our family trouble. We had been wandering together in the garden one beautiful hot summer afternoon, and came in together, thinking it was near dressing time. When we looked at the clock in the little ante-room, which had a door opening on to the lawn, we found it still wanted half an hour of that time, and the rest of the party were not returned from their various rides and drives, so we sat down on a tempting sofa in this same little room, which was not often used except as a passage to other apartments. There was a good deal of dark carved oak about the house

in various places, and some very handsome wainscoting in that room, which I observed for the first time, as I sat that day talking to Miss Clifford. It happened to strike me, as I did so, that there was a strange discrepancy between some parts, which were evidently extremely ancient, and others which seemed as if the work of a few years past ; and this I remarked to my companion, asking her whether it were not so, or whether what I took for new was really old.

“ No, you are quite right,” said Miss Clifford. “ That part of the wainscot which you are observing has only been put up this last year or two—in fact, the old part was destroyed by the fire. I think you were not here at the time ; but I daresay you heard enough about it to recollect the time I mean.”

“ I do indeed.”

“ Yes, just when that poor little Flora Crofton made such an egregious fool of herself. And—but, oh ! I really had forgotten it was your brother, Miss Markham. Pray excuse me. Mamma says I am always saying the wrong

thing to the wrong person. It was very *gauche* of me, but I am sure you will forgive me."

"Oh! yes. Indeed, there is nothing to forgive."

"You are always kind and good-natured, I know, so I must ask you one word about those two nice remarkably handsome young people. I hope their run-away match has turned out well?"

"I am grieved to say we have never heard from them since that unfortunate time."

"You don't say so! Well, you have had news of them, I daresay?"

"Indeed we have not."

And then Miss Clifford and I sat silent for a few moments; and then, fearing she might think I was annoyed, I began to speak at random about the fire, asking if she had not been dreadfully frightened, and whether the mischief had been confined to that room only. She answered readily,

"We were all more frightened than hurt, I believe, for the flames were soon got under; but they had a very awful appearance, as you

may suppose, in the dead of the night. And poor Flora Crofton, whose room was just over this, was awoke by them, and began shrieking, as was natural she should do under the circumstances."

"Yes, I can fancy that; and then, what did Claude do?" I asked, making a desperate effort to gain some insight into the proceedings that night.

"What did your brother do?" repeated Miss Clifford, slowly. "Well, he did everything that a brave man could have done in regard to the fire, but a great deal of mischief besides, I fear, as he carried Flora fainting out of her room, and was in a state of distraction, I believe, till she recovered."

"But she could not know that."

"Well, I think she was a wee bit conscious the whole time. However, that is not for me to decide. I only know Mr. Markham rode off for the doctor the instant she opened her eyes —those beautiful eyes!—and so far he saw her no more that night."

“No, nor the next day, for he came to us to tell us you were all safe here.”

“Well, then, after that he came back here according to promise,” said Miss Clifford; and seeing that I was anxiously waiting to hear more, she continued, “I fear it must have been that same evening they came to an understanding, for I had never observed any particular attention on your brother’s part towards her; and, in fact, the knowledge of her engagement to Lord Ramsay, and approaching marriage, put all such ideas out of one’s head; and, of course, being so pretty and fascinating, every man that came near was devoted to her; and I had somehow or other an idea that Mr. Markham was a species of adopted brother, so I never speculated upon him as a lover, till I heard of their unfortunate elopement.”

“Not even at the time of the fire?”

“No—it seemed natural enough that he should go through fire or water to save her, and be in a state of the utmost anxiety till he had ascertained she had received no harm; besides, there

was poor little Carrie Elton breaking her heart for him. Ah! I ought not to have said that—please forget it, Miss Markham."

"It is quite safe with me; and I love her for it. But as we are on that subject, do tell me, Miss Clifford, was nothing ever seen or suspected the next day of what happened the following?"

"Oh! no. Who would have dreamt of such a thing? I saw your brother and Flora Crofton together that same evening—the one after he had been with you all at home. Well, I remember her loitering alone in the hall, after every one had gone up to dress; and when I came down, and passed through, I found Mr. Markham had arrived. He was standing over the fire, still in his riding-dress, and she sitting near; he was bending down, talking earnestly to her, and I remembered afterwards she was crying; but as soon as she heard some one coming near, she looked up quite brightly, though I saw the tears on her eye-lashes, and thought how pretty she looked; and then,

when she saw me, she said, ‘I don’t think I am up to dining with a party this evening, I am so terribly shaken with my fright last night, but I shall be all right afterwards; and please tell Mrs. Elton I shall hope to make my appearance in the drawing-room by the time she comes out from dinner.’”

“ Well, and then that evening did not you observe anything ?” I asked, quite trembling with my eager anxiety to hear more.

“ Nothing whatever. I was not, however, watching or suspecting anything between them, nor was any one else, I believe. I should have said, had any one asked me, that Mr. Markham was more with Carrie Elton than any one else. I remember Flora looking very pale, but very beautiful, and thinking she was over-exerting herself in coming down that evening, and that neither Mr. Crofton nor Lord Ramsay would have sanctioned it, had they been present; but, of course, as she liked it, no one could object.”

“ Well, what do you remember of the next day ?”

“Ah! that was *the day!* I think there was a sort of bustle of people going away, as far as I can remember; and Miss Crofton said she found her father was coming home that evening, and if my aunt would lend her the pony-carriage, she should like to drive to the station in the evening and meet him, and return home with him; and then there was some demur, and alteration made in the plan, because my aunt said it would be quite dark at that hour; so it was settled she was to have the brougham, and go down to meet Mr. Crofton, which she did, apparently. It was about the dinner hour, and no one ever thought for a moment of anything being otherwise than she represented. Her own carriage was to meet her at the station, and she sent my aunt’s home the instant after it had set her down. No one tried to persuade her to remain, as she seemed a good deal upset with the fright from the fire, and we all thought she wanted to get home and be quiet, as was very natural. One thing, perhaps, might have seemed rather odd—she would not take her maid with

her, but said she would send for her the next day, as she had not packed up all her things; but it did not strike anyone at the time."

"And Claude, where was he?"

"He left early in the morning, saying he wished to be at home to meet Mr. Crofton. I do not think he saw Flora that day, it must all have been settled the previous one."

"But Mr. Crofton never came."

"No, nor was ever expected, as we heard afterwards—nor did Flora ever return to her home—your brother Mr. Markham was seen at the station the same evening, waiting for the town train to London; he told some one he was going to meet Mr. Crofton. And Flora went also by that same train—in fact, they were seen together then and there, but even then for a day or two people doubted—some, whether in the dim light, there might not have been some mistake as to Miss Crofton's identity; and then, when it was found she had never returned home—or her father, that same night, whether she might not have been unexpectedly summoned, and

that Mr. Markham (improbable as it no doubt was) had been commissioned to escort her on the road. That is all I know," said Miss Clifford pausing.

This was the first authentic account I had ever heard of that unhappy affair.

CHAPTER IX.

THE days passed very quietly and uneventfully away after my return home. In Juliet's absence I had plenty of employment, for I had promised to look after her interests in the village, as far as I was able, and in so doing found abundant occupation for my time and thoughts. It was almost astonishing to me how quickly the time slipped away, and how much I was drawn out of myself, and all those subjects of painful contemplation which had so engrossed me of late. I was in part learning a great lesson in life, and that was, to do without happiness—I mean, without any of the things that had seemed to me to constitute the meaning of that word. I was becoming reconciled to the state of existence in which I moved and had my

being. Fortunately it was one of constant mental and bodily activity, so—though my mind might have craved a wider round of occupation and variety of amusement—I learnt to be content without. I will not say there was no occasional repinings, no regretful looking back upon the doors of that Eden, now closed for ever to my longing sight—no speculations as to what might have been; had Claude been true to his benefactor, and had Flora been faithful to her betrothed lover, how different had been my portion in life! Such as it was, however, with that I had to do, and not with what might have been under happier circumstances. No doubt it was all rightly ordered, and my part was to make the best of it; and so striving, I went my way.

It was uphill work, I found, but so is all work that leads onwards and upwards. About that time Miss Ramsay received news which filled her with excitement, and that of the most pleasurable kind; for it was conveyed in a letter written by Lord Ramsay himself, and addressed

to her, though its contents were evidently intended for the information of all who cared to hear them.

It appeared he had been duly impressed with his Aunt Alethea's expression of sympathy in his disappointment of former days, and had acknowledged it at the time ; and she had, moreover, heard from him once or twice since.

Lord Ramsay was a good man—no one ever doubted it ; he was honest, upright and sincere, *but*—he was not indulgent in his way of regarding the frailties of others. He could make no allowances for those who had been placed in more slippery paths of life than himself. It had always been evident to me that he had never at any time cordially liked or approved of my brother Claude—he looked upon his youthful errors and extravagancies with no indulgent eye. Kind and liberal as he undoubtedly was, both in thought and intention, towards the rest of his family, he never intimated the least wish or intention of befriending him in any way. It might certainly have arisen from the fact that

Mr. Crofton's munificent patronage had rendered all other superfluous ; but still, when it *had* been needed it had never been tendered ; and, though apparently friendly in his manner to his cousin Claude, he and Lord Ramsay had never been intimate.

Claude himself felt it, and mentioned it to me, though he never resented it ; and I knew perfectly well what he meant ; but the whole thing was too impalpable to have been accurately defined or made subject of complaint.

After Claude's unfortunate lapse, I understood that Lord Ramsay gave vent to his feelings against his erring relation in terms of such unsparing condemnation, that as they happened to be repeated again and recorded in a letter of condolence written by Mrs. Charles Ramsay to my step-mother, such offence was taken (without due consideration of the provocation), that Mrs. Markham declared nothing could ever make her speak to Lord Ramsay again. Poor woman ! she was not likely to have the option ; but it was the cause of many painful and unpleasant

disputes between the two sisters. Miss Alethea upheld Lord Ramsay, and declared his indignation to be just and reasonable, and the expression of it abundantly called for. Without attempting to adjust the balance, I only record the results, which, of course, tended to widen the family breach.

Lord Ramsay's present letter to his Aunt Alethea was written from a foreign capital, where he had been passing some months; and being on intimate terms with the British Ambassador there, had, after a short acquaintance and engagement, been united in marriage with his only daughter, a young lady of great beauty, and of course possessed of every desirable quality and accomplishment besides.

"I would not write before the event had actually taken place," wrote his prudent lordship, "knowing, by painful experience, how vain it is to reckon on the future, however firm our grasp may appear of the destinies it controls. So I have waited till I could announce my intended marriage as an 'accomplished fact.' "

And then he went on to expatiate on several circumstances of interest connected with the event, touching slightly but feelingly on the merits of his beautiful bride. Altogether it was a letter to be greatly prized by Miss Alethea, whether regarded as a tribute due to her superior sense and discrimination, as well as to the sympathy and affection displayed by her in the past time of tribulation. It was also a flattering token of consideration and regard from the head of the family, and as such it was equally welcome and gratifying.

Mrs. Markham treated the whole affair with the utmost nonchalance, and seemed to think Lord Ramsay's marriage was a matter which concerned her very little ; and in truth it was so.

“ I have nothing to do with Ramsay, and he never was any particular favourite of mine. He came here when it suited his convenience, and he stayed away when it did not ; he never showed me any attention in London, when I might have been the better for it ; and now, whatever you may think or expect of him and

his wife, I am very sure I shall see nothing of either, neither have I the least wish, or desire, or expectation of so doing."

And as Mrs. Markham ended her speech with rather a heightened colour, she took up her work and pulled her needle through rather more vigorously than the occasion demanded. Miss Ramsay, meanwhile, could afford to be tolerant, and she sat nodding over her desk in a state of great complacency in silence, till her sister, after a short struggle with her worsted and her temper, flung out of the room in no gentle mood. And then Miss Alethea turned to me and began her discourse.

"I am not surprised she feels it—it is but natural she should do so, for, you see, Ramsay never alludes to her in any way, or sends any message whatever to her, or congratulations upon Juliet's marriage."

"I daresay it was too humble an affair to have been heard of by Lord Ramsay, and he is too full of his own happiness just now, I suppose, to think much about other people's."

"Well, there may be something in that, but he might have sent love to Aunt Charlotte."

"I don't think men are so given to send their love in letters as we are."

"Who told you that?" asked Miss Alethea briskly, "for your experience in that line can't be very great. Oh, I suppose Mr. Crofton said so to you; it was like one of his remarks."

As I did not deny it she went on with her observations touching Lord Ramsay's marriage, and her sister Charlotte's ill luck in having no part in her nephew's remembrance on the occasion. It was no doubt a grand connexion, and, as far as worldly advantages went, a very satisfactory one, for Lord Ramsay to have made; but I was very much of my step-mother's opinion on the subject, that none of her branch of the family were likely to be the better for it in any point of view. Still, it was no doubt right and amiable in Miss Ramsay to look at it in a perfectly disinterested light, and to feel a lively satisfaction in the fact of her favourite nephew being so happily and suitably established in life.

I therefore listened to her observations with all the attention I could command, and put in a remark whenever she gave me an opportunity for so doing. Somehow this little event—for great as it might be to those more nearly concerned, it was of small interest to me—seemed for a time to disturb the tranquillity of our little circle more than might have been imagined. It seemed to renew the bitter recollections of the past, and to bring back the thought of Claude, lost and disgraced, more vividly than ever, before our eyes.

Mrs. Markham's fit of temper gave place to one of grief that same evening; and when her sister was out of the room she talked long and despondingly to me of her long absent son.

“Why should he remain away in this way?” she at last asked impatiently; adding, “It was foolish and wrong to marry as he did, but Flora was worse than him to consent to it; still they might come back now—at least to me! It is not as if Claude had been doing anything dishonest in Mr. Crofton's accounts, or with his money, poor fellow, is it?”

What could I say? She knew nothing of that large missing sum of money, it was evident, and I would not tell her of it; no doubt if there could have been any truth in the surmises respecting it, that would have been quite sufficient cause to have kept Claude from opening any communication with his family. I never thought it could be so for a moment, but it was strange that for all these many months not a word nor the slightest sign was heard or seen of the runaway pair. I was sure no one in our neighbourhood had the least idea where they were, or what had become of them from the day they had departed. We should have been certain to have heard a whisper of it from Mr. Jones had any such rumour gone abroad, but it remained all blank dead silence as regarded them. Mrs. Markham continued so depressed, that it was a matter of more than common rejoicing to me when, after nearly a two months' absence, Mr. and Mrs. Dillon announced their return home in a few days. I hoped it would give a new turn to Mrs. Markham's thoughts, and endea-

voured to engage her interest in the little preparations, which it was my especial interest and province to make, in certain arrangements at the Rectory, in expectation of their return. I was doomed to be disappointed, however, when I had with some difficulty prevailed on my step-mother to allow me to drive her over in the pony-carriage to the Parsonage, the afternoon that her daughter and her husband were coming home. We found they were not expected till late, and Mrs. Markham positively declared she should not remain to welcome their return. It would only make her nervous, she said, sitting there and waiting for their coming, she could do very well without seeing them till the next day, and she had no doubt they would be quite as comfortable without her; there would be plenty of time to see each other all the rest of their lives. She did not think Juliet was likely to have another holiday, and her own chances of anything pleasant were equally remote, so she would reserve her meeting with her daughter till the next day, when I could ask them to

come and dine at the Manor-house, and spend a long afternoon, if they liked it.

All this sounded very cool and indifferent, but it was evident, as she looked round and noted with a critical eye the very simple, almost meagre details of Juliet's future home, she felt something like bitter regret in having consented to her becoming the wife of Luke Dillon.

"Such an establishment for *my* daughter, and the grand-daughter of Lord Ramsay!—and though Juliet's no beauty, she might have done so much better in marrying Cyril Elton. I hear his house is the perfection of niceness, and his wife has a carriage and everything she can want, to say nothing of the superiority of the connection!" exclaimed my step-mother, who did not think it necessary to control the expression of her discontent in courtesy to my feelings as Luke's near relation.

She had, as I have said, become perfectly tolerant of me, and even kind in many respects of late. Still, Mrs. Markham's nature was by

no means changed, and she gave vent to whatever feeling might be in the ascendant, utterly regardless of those of any other individual. I must confess, as her glance rested with more of contemptuous pity than interest on many of my poor little arrangements, I began to fear all was not so nice and comfortable as I had flattered myself. The treasures I had assembled there looked poor and insignificant, and so I apprehended had been my best endeavours to ornament and adorn the bare little drawing-room at the Parsonage.

"I see you have brought all your own pretty things here, Marian," said my step-mother, as she examined each well-known object in turn, and laid them aside somewhat contemptuously; "and it is very kind of you, I am sure, and Juliet ought to be very much obliged, but I really doubt if she will. She has no eyes for the beautiful, and no taste for the picturesque, so any artistic efforts will be quite thrown away upon her, and I need not tell you her husband in that respect is well suited to her."

I laughed as I answered—

“I did not aim either at the beautiful or the picturesque. I only thought, as some of these things are rather pretty, and some came originally from this dear old room, I would make restitution, though I quite agree with you that Juliet has the good taste to prefer the useful to the ornamental.”

“I don’t call that good taste at all—on the contrary, I think it is a great deficiency in a woman, especially a young one, to have no liking for pretty things. I have observed it in Juliet in a hundred ways; but come, I think I must be going now. I suppose there is nothing else you want me to see?”

And then my step-mother yawned, as if very weary of her afternoon’s work, and walked languidly out of the house up to the little garden gate, where old John was in waiting to drive her home. Her visit of inspection had rather a depressing effect upon me, but I could not give up my plan of remaining to welcome the young couple home, and it did seem very

strange that Juliet's own mother was less eager than myself to do so. She appeared determined to take no interest or pleasure in the daughter that remained to her, and was now settled for life close to her own home, whilst she incessantly bewailed the removal of her son to some unknown locality. Thus it is, we seldom value what we still possess as much as that which we have lost. I suppose it is human nature.

It was about eight o'clock that same evening when I heard the fly from the Thorpe station rumbling up to the Parsonage gate—there was no drive up to the house. I heard the voices of Luke and his wife as they descended from the vehicle, and stood talking to the old house-keeper at the gate, where she had gone to receive her young mistress, and welcome her and her master home. There were besides two young girls, recently added to the household at the Rectory, taken from the school, where Juliet herself had taught, and helped to make them the active, tidy, intelligent-looking little

servant maids into which they found themselves promoted.

It was getting dusk, so I waited with the said Martha and Mary just inside the door, whilst the old housekeeper went forward to meet her master and his bride, and offer what assistance might be needed. The young couple gave the old woman a few light parcels, for her own satisfaction; and then Luke took the heavy boxes on his active shoulders; whilst Juliet, almost as helpful herself, followed with the remainder of their smaller packages. Then, all the luggage being disposed of, the two young maidens started forward to receive it from their mistress's hands, and offer their shy welcome.

I waited till both Luke and Juliet were fairly arrived within the doors of their own house, and then it came to my turn to offer my greeting—not the least hearty because the last. It was a cheery and pleasant thing to witness the coming home of this newly-wedded pair, and watch the looks of respectful love and ad-

miring recognition cast on them by the members of their primitive little household—the old servant and her two young handmaidens ; and not less pleasant to note how cordially both the young clergyman and his bride responded to all, and wished them happy in their respective turns. For my own part, how glad I felt I had stayed to welcome them home, undeterred by my step-mother's hints that my sister and her husband would greatly prefer having their house to themselves the first evening of their return. That such was not the case, I was happily persuaded the instant I met Luke's look of pleased surprise, and Juliet's start of affectionate recognition ; whilst she exclaimed—

“ Oh ! Marian, dear good Marian, to come and meet us directly ! How glad I am ! And it makes everything look so home-like !”



CHAPTER X.

IT was not till after Juliet and I were quietly alone that evening that she began to talk comfortably, and then told me of the great event of their wedding tour. Before that, however, she ran all over the house and garden, peeped into her closets, examined all my collection of curiosities, which she had seen a hundred times before, but now looked at, very much as if she would have liked to have sent them all back whence they came, though fearful of hurting my feelings by saying as much. Still, she ventured a little mild remonstrance, even whilst she expressed many more thanks than the occasion demanded.

“It is too dear and generous of you, Marian, to have sent me all these things, that are really

precious to you, thinking no doubt that I should value them also ; but—but the real truth is, Marian, dear, I do not want to be encouraged in liking such vanities—and vanities you know they are, dear.”

“ No, indeed I do not. I see no vanity in a poor little china bowl or tea-pot; or in an ivory work-box.”

“ Well, perhaps not in the work-box, because it is useful,” said Juliet, considering a little.

“ And is not the old china useful?—for instance, the tea-pot?”

“ Not where you have put it, Marian,” replied Juliet, laughing ; and then, more seriously the young wife said, “ Pray—pray do not think me ungrateful, my very kind sister, but the fact is, I do earnestly wish to do my duty; and as Luke and I are poor, we have no right to ape the luxuries of the rich; and if I try to ornament my room, it will seem as if I am spending money in show and ostentation, which ought to be given to the poor; so it was my intention to have had everything as plain as possible about

me, and not to attempt anything beyond neatness and cleanliness in any room in my house."

"Well, *you* have not attempted it, so let the blame rest on me. If any one admires your old china, say it was my dear mother's, and Aunt Alice's, and was here long before you. So—she may keep it with a clear conscience—eh, Luke?"

Luke had been standing a little apart, not joining in our conversation, but listening to us, though he had a book in his hand. He answered promptly enough, to show he had given us his full attention, as he said,

"Juliet will keep it gratefully, in memory of your kindness, and I shall prize it as an heirloom," he said, with a pleasant smile.

So that mighty matter was settled, and Luke went out of the room to look into his own little den, and see what papers or letters might be awaiting him there. Then Juliet had the candles lighted, and tea having been already despatched, she and I sat down to our half hour's chat, before I should be summoned to take my leave and go home. Juliet gave her-

self a holiday that evening ; her work things were not unpacked, so we sat side by side on the little hard sofa ; and then I asked, referring to something she had already said,

“ Now, Juliet, I long to know what it is you have to tell me ? Something you never mentioned in your letters.”

“ I have seen Flora Crofton,” Juliet answered, in a low voice.

“ What, actually seen Claude and Flora, and never said a word to your mother about it ? Oh ! Juliet, how could you keep it to yourself ?”

“ I only saw her, not him ; and it only happened within the last fortnight, during our stay in Switzerland, when you know Luke took some duty for an English clergyman, who was sent out by the society, and fell ill ; so Luke, hearing of it, volunteered his services. It was that kept us a fortnight longer than we should otherwise have been away. He was glad of a little work, so that we might not feel our tour had been all play and self-indulgence.”

“ Well, that would have been very excusable,

under the circumstances. But now tell me all about your meeting Flora, and how she looked, and what she said, and how it came you did not see Claude—dear, dear Claude!—also? Oh! how thankful and glad I feel they have been seen, or at least heard of. Go on, Juliet. I won't interrupt you. Tell me all about it."

All this I said with trembling eagerness, and an impatience I could hardly control; whilst Juliet, with her habitual composure and deliberation, proceeded to tell me what I desired to hear, but not as quickly as I wished.

"It was just after we had left Interlachen—we went to stay at a little village near. It was an out-of-the-way little place, but it was much cheaper than living in the town, and we did not wish to spend more than we had originally determined, so we took up our quarters, as I tell you, at a little village. It was in a lovely picturesque place, and though Luke had a little further to go to attend to the duties he had undertaken, he did not mind it; and whilst he was away I amused myself very well in visiting

all the cottages round, and making many acquaintances amongst the poor families there. You cannot think, Marian, what a nice intelligent set of people some of those Swiss mountaineers are. I made charming friendships among them, whilst Luke was absent for some hours every day. And then there was a nice Madame Monad, the young wife of an old Swiss pastor. She often came and walked and talked with me; and one day it happened, whilst we were taking one of our long rambles, that a carriage—a little open sort of car, with a stout mountain pony—drove past us. I had my parasol up, and hardly noticed the carriage, or the people in it, till it was almost past, and then I saw there were two young people in it, a gentleman and a lady. I looked up as it went by, and I was struck for a moment by a sort of resemblance in the young man (whose face I only partly saw) to my brother Claude, and yet he seemed so entirely a foreigner, that I never dreamt for one moment that it *was* him; it was something in the general style of complexion and features that struck me,

though I should have said this young man was darker. But, as I tell you, the whole thing was so sudden and imperfect, that I should never have thought anything more about it if I had not observed him speak to his companion, and at the same time slacken the pace at which they were driving, whilst she turned to look back. Think, then, Marian, what was my intense feeling of astonishment, and I may say gladness, when the lady turned, and I saw her as distinctly as I see you, and it *was* Flora, yes, Flora Crofton, or, as I suppose I ought to say, Flora Markham."

"Well, did she recognise you? You must have been as easy for her to see, as she appeared so plainly and unmistakably to you; especially as Claude must have recognised you by his speaking to his wife," said I, trembling with excitement.

"I hardly know what to think," replied Juliet, resuming her story, appearing to meditate as she did so, and then said, "As Flora looked round, and our eyes met, I started for-

ward, and in my eagerness called out, ‘ Claude ! Claude ! it is I !—Juliet, your sister ! Oh ! stop for me !’ But neither of them appeared either to hear me or to see me. Flora, after a brief look, turned quickly round, and said something to her companion. Oh ! it could not be our Claude, who then whipped the pony, and set off on such a quick trot, that poor I had no chance of overtaking them, and I was left panting and breathless in the middle of the road, almost crying, I confess, with vexation, and waiting till Madame Monad came up to me.”

“ You must have been mistaken, Juliet dear, it never could have been them ; or, if it were, they could never have seen you. Why, surely it would have been as much happiness to them to have met as to you ; but they would never expect to see you there, and so perhaps failed to recognise you.”

“ Well, you shall hear ; but, remember, *I* did not expect to meet Claude and his wife, and *I* did not fail to know them—at least her. *I* should never have been so sure as to the gentleman *I* saw.”

"But if it was Flora, the man must have been Claude," said I, positively.

Juliet, without answering my remark, went on—

"When Madame Monad came up to me, she was in a state of great excitement, wondering and exclaiming at my escapade, running like a wild thing after that strange car, shouting to the occupants thereof; and being left as I was, so ignominiously *planté la*, I soon satisfied her curiosity and astonishment, by saying I believed the people who had just driven by to be near relations of my own, and I was anxious beyond everything to stop and speak to them. I thought I saw a strange shade of surprise pass over my friend's face, and then I asked—'Have you ever seen them before?' Madame Monad answered readily, 'Oh! yes, it is the handsome couple—they came a month or two ago, and live in a very retired little châlet two miles from here. I have often seen them drive by. She is apparently English; but he is a foreigner.' 'Oh! no,' I exclaimed eagerly, 'he is as English

as I am—in fact, dear Madame Monad, he is my own dear brother Claude, who made a runaway match nearly two years ago, and we have never seen or heard of them since.' '*Mais vraiment! est il possible?*' I can hear her voice of astonishment, almost of incredulity, it seemed to me; but she said no more. I then questioned and cross-questioned her, but she appeared unwilling, after what I had said, to retail any of the rumours there might be abroad in that little village respecting *La belle Anglaise*, as she called Flora. I found, however, though no one knew them personally, that it was generally supposed that this young couple were for the present living in an isolated little hotel, some two miles distant. It was conjectured, my friend acknowledged, that for some reason or another they were *in hiding*, and no one attempted to invade the privacy they affected. She understood they gave their name as Monsieur and Madame Delacour. It seemed very strange to me, this assumption of a foreign appellation; but Flora was always rather

flighty, I knew, though I loved her dearly, notwithstanding her whimsical little ways; and of course I felt sure she could make Claude follow her lead in any direction. So I only said to Madame Monad, that whatever name this young couple might choose to call themselves, it was my firm persuasion that they could be no other than my brother and his wife; and that, as they were staying at an hotel, I would at least go there the next morning, in the hope of making assurance doubly sure.

"The period of our stay in that locale was nearly at an end, so I determined to lose no time in prosecuting my adventure. I should have been glad to have had Luke with me, but as he was not to return for another day or two, I determined to take upon myself the whole responsibility of the enterprise. There was a charming little Swiss guide-boy, called Fritz, who had often gone with Luke and me on our exploring expeditions, and I determined to make him the companion of my walk to the little inn by the side of the Lake Thun; it was

not very far from the town, and, I was told, was one of the prettiest spots in that beautiful neighbourhood, and yet exceedingly retired, as far as to houses being very few and far between just there. I was quite sure Adine Monad would have gone with me, but I did not ask her. I wished to see Claude and Flora quite alone, as they would, no doubt, wish also to see me.

“ You know I am a good walker, and used to wild ground, so I got on very well, till Fritz pointed to the sweetest, most picturesque little dwelling, standing quite alone by the side of the lake, and told me that was the hotel I wished to enter. You may suppose I lost no time in making my inquiries at the door of the same, and was answered readily enough that Monsieur and Madame Delacour had apartments in that house—that they believed Madame was in, but Monsieur had gone out early, to Berne, they believed. ‘ Then show me to the apartment of Madame,’ said I quickly; and I was answered by a ‘ *suivez moi*,’ and the wo-

man turned into the house, whilst I followed closely on her steps."

"And then you actually saw Flora!—met her face to face, and talked again with her, as in the dear old days at the Hall!" I interrupted, with a pang of bitter recollection.

"You shall hear," said Juliet, resuming the thread of her narrative. "The landlady led me up some stairs, and round a wide-open gallery, that conducted us to a set of rooms quite at the other end of the house; and then, stopping before a door, threw it open with an '*Entrè donc-la voila*,' and left me to make my own announcement. A young lady was sitting on a sort of couch, with her back turned to the door, and near a window which commanded a beautiful view of the lovely lake beneath. She seemed to be occupied with some sort of bird, which she held on her finger, and was talking to it in a coaxing, caressing tone of voice, though when I entered she interrupted her employment to say, without turning her head—'Ah! is that you, Caro? You are *de retours* sooner than I

expected.' 'It is I, Flora—Juliet—your friend, whom you passed yesterday without seeing,' said I, coming up to her; for I saw in a moment it *was* Flora, and no other, and I felt very pleased and glad that it was so, and that we might meet as sisters at last, and that I should be the means (under Providence) of bringing back our dear Claude into his own family again. At the sound of my voice Flora sprang up from the couch, shook the bird from her hand, and stood confronting me for a moment like one petrified. I was quite shocked, however, to see, and so you will be, Marian, to hear, that there was more of impatient annoyance, even displeasure, in her countenance than any corresponding expression of pleasure at our unexpected meeting. She stared at me for a moment, then surrendered her hand to my outstretched one, and said, 'In the name of all that's wonderful, how did you ever find me out here, Juliet Markham?' 'I saw you yesterday driving past me with Claude.' 'With *Claude!*'—in an accent of astonishment. 'Yes

—did not you see me ?' I asked, with equal surprise. 'I saw some one *like you*, with the old pastor Monad's young wife, but could not believe my eyes. Is—is your mother and all the rest here ?'

"I then briefly explained how things were, and that it was Juliet Dillon and not Markham she was talking to. I fancied she seemed relieved when she heard it was only Luke and me, and that he was away for a day or two. I cannot tell you how strange and how peculiar her whole conduct and manner seemed to me ; she was looking very beautiful, even more so than when I had last seen her ; and what particularly struck me as strange was a certain air of refinement in everything about her, as well as in her own dress and appearance, as I glanced round the room, which was tolerably spacious, I felt sure the various costly articles assembled there must have belonged to Claude and her, and not to the people of the place, they were so entirely at variance with what I had seen of the rest of the little inn. I confess I felt almost at

a loss how to proceed, and what to say first, for Flora gave me no encouragement either to stay or to say another word; but I am not easily deterred from doing what I think right and necessary, so I seated myself, unasked, and remarked I had a long walk.

“‘Indeed!’ said Flora; adding, ‘that’s a pity.’

“‘So it is, Flora, if you don’t care to see me; but now we are sisters, I must treat you as one; so I came without ceremony, and I feel sure Claude will be glad to see me. When do you expect him back?’

“Flora looked at me for a moment with an air of perplexity, and then answered in a low hurried voice, ‘Not to-day.’

“‘Ah, I am grieved indeed! he would, I know, have given me a kind welcome.’

“‘No doubt; he was a kind brother.’

“‘Yes, he was kind in every relation of life, as, no doubt, you have found ere this, Flora. You must have the best of husbands!’

“‘I make no complaint of my husband,’ said Flora rather evasively; and then looking out of

the window she rose up hastily and said, ‘With your permission, Mrs. Dillon, I will go out and make an inquiry as to whether my husband has left any message about coming back this evening, and then I can let you know.’

“With that Flora glided out of the room, leaving me and the cockatoo to entertain each other. She was back in less than five minutes, and said carelessly,

“‘ You have had your walk in vain, I fear, but perhaps you will take something before you return?’ and before I could reply a servant came in with refreshments. They were simple enough, but still served with a certain accompaniment of luxury, that set me wondering most uneasily and entirely took away my appetite, though I was thankful for a draught of some light sparkling wine and water ; and then I took the opportunity of remarking, as Flora handed me the glass,

“‘ What a beautiful kind of glass this is ; really everything seems very *recherché* in this little out of the way hotel !’

“‘Oh no, things are common enough here ; but we always bring a few necessaries with us,’ said Flora carelessly.

“‘Really,’ I returned laughing, ‘this is quite a new experience to me, as to what are necessities, and I think must be so to Claude, unless he has found a mine somewhere.’

“Flora, however, made no reply, but began talking again to her bird, as she fed it with fruit from the luncheon tray. I confess, Marian, I began to feel both impatient and angry at Flora’s studied cool indifference, the little chance there seemed of seeing Claude at all, and the strange incongruity of everything around. So, as I set down the beautiful crystal goblet I had been admiring, I said,

“‘Well, Flora, I will not bother you by staying any longer ; only I did hope, when I took this long walk on purpose to see you, you would have been a little glad.’

“‘Indeed I am very sorry you have had so much trouble, and so little pleasure, but really it is not my fault.’

"I repressed an angry retort that rose to my lips, Marian, for I remembered just at the time about a 'soft answer,' so wishing to be kind to Claude's wife, I said,

"'Well, perhaps there is an awkwardness in these sort of meetings, after what has passed, Flora, and you may feel it so, but do remember at any time how glad Luke and I shall be to see you, dear; you cannot have forgotten the old happy days, and how we used to be together then. How I wish they could come over again; and that we could get you and Claude to come home to us—yes, I know what you are thinking of—your father, but I daresay if he knew you were quite happy he would forget and forgive.'"

"And what did Flora say to that?" I interrupted eagerly.

"I think she looked a little more like her old self, and kinder at me; and she sighed, and said softly,

"'Yes, I hope he would.'

"'Well! only try us all dear,' I said as urgent-

ly as I could ; and then looking round on all the costly trifles and fine things about, I ventured to say,

“ ‘I am sure you must have great influence over dear Claude ; pray do not let him get into expensive habits he cannot afford ; you know carelessness in money matters was once his besetting sin. Pray forgive me, if I entreat and warn you, Flora, to beware of extravagance.’

“ Then Flora looked up, her eyes flashing, and she answered as haughtily as possible,

“ ‘Who gave you the right to lecture me, and interfere in my concerns, Mrs. Dillon ?’

“ ‘It is only as they concern my brother Claude. You must not be angry with me, for I have heard many things said which you have not, and if any one but me saw all these expensive things in my brother Claude’s possession, they would believe (though I know how innocent he is) all that miserable story your father’s agent, Mr. Forest, got up about him.’

“ ‘What story ? what do you mean ?’ said Flora with a sudden interest in what I said.

“ ‘ Why, that Claude had appropriated some of Mr. Crofton’s money at the very time you ran away together.’

“ ‘ And Mr. Forest dares say that !’ said Flora indignantly.

“ ‘ Indeed he did, but somehow I suppose he found he was in the wrong, for the matter was dropped, and no more said about it. Still, it had been publicly said, and many I daresay believed it.’

“ ‘ But you did not, nor any of his family ?’

“ ‘ Oh no, we all knew Claude too well ; he would never do such a dishonest thing.’

“ ‘ You are right there,’ said Flora impetuously, ‘ Claude Markham is the very soul of honour, he ought to have been a knight in the days of chivalry !’

“ I was pleased to hear Flora speak so warmly, yet, at the same time, thought her way of expressing herself overstrained and whimsical ; but it was very like Flora Crofton, so I did not tell her I thought no true knight would have run off with her as he had done ; and I thought

he had behaved very ill both to her father and Lord Ramsay, though I knew he was utterly incapable of the baseness of taking another man's money. So I held my peace as to that matter, and got up to wish Flora good-bye. She let me kiss her, and said good-bye quite kindly, and then I called little Fritz and walked back to my own inn. And that is all I saw of Flora Crofton."

"What! did you make no attempt to see Claude? Surely if you had, Juliet, he would have given you a different reception. I wonder you never made another effort."

"I did," said Juliet rather sadly; "as soon as Luke came back I got him to walk over to Thun with me; but when we got to the hotel it was all in vain."

"What! Surely you don't mean that Claude—our Claude behaved ill too to you—that he would not see you!"

"He evidently had no wish to do so, for we found they were both gone; they had left the inn the very next morning after my visit betimes.

They were afraid, it seems, of a repetition of it."

"Did you ask where they were gone?"

"Yes, but to no purpose; no one knew; there was not a trace of them left in any direction."

CHAPTER XI.

JULIET'S recital that evening cost me a sleepless night. There was something altogether so strange and uncomfortable in her meeting with Flora, and the avoidance of Claude as well as herself, that I could in no way account for their conduct. I turned the matter over every way in my mind during that long night, but did not arrive in the morning any nearer a conclusion than when I had lain down some seven or eight hours before. One terrible thought would present itself in the night watches, and that was suggested by Juliet's account of the evident luxury in which the young couple were living, and my recollection of the missing money; but even that would hardly have sufficed to support them in that style for nearly two years. I

knew that Claude had saved very little during the time he had been receiving a regular salary, and must be without any means of subsistence, except such as he could earn. Whilst, on the other hand, I felt equally sure that Flora had no independent income whatever, and her father was not likely, under the circumstances, to have made her any allowance.

Juliet was with us early the next morning. She did not wait to avail herself of her mother's invitation to dinner, though she said,

"We will come again and dine with you this evening, if you wish it, but I thought I would look in before I went my rounds. Besides," said she, in an aside to me, "I wanted to tell you that Luke thinks I had better not say anything to mamma about my unpleasant meeting with Flora; it would only set her worrying about Claude more than ever, and you see I have nothing whatever to tell her about him."

I saw that to give me that caution was her object in coming so early; and afterwards, when I met Luke on his way to our house later in

the day, he was still more explicit as to his own views on the subject, the bare hint of which was enough to fill me with horror and dismay. Juliet was then within with her mother, and as I turned in my walk to accompany Luke, I began speaking on the matter which was uppermost in my mind, and observed,

“Juliet says you think she had better say nothing about seeing Flora and Claude to her mother?”

Luke replied gravely,

“There was nothing satisfactory to relate in her meeting with—with—Miss Crofton——”

“Mrs. Claude Markham, you mean,” I interrupted; but Luke, unheeding my amendment, went on, as though I had not spoken,

“And your brother she did not see at all.”

“You forget, Luke, though she could not make him hear and stop, she *did see* Claude driving Flora the day before her visit. Surely Mrs. Markham might like to hear he had been *seen*, though not spoken to.”

Luke did not reply at once; he seemed about

to speak, and then closed his lips firmly. He stopped for a moment, and of course I stopped also, but nothing came of it. He then walked on very slowly, and spoke still more slowly, even hesitating as he did so, though it was little enough he did say, as he observed,

“I do not—think—she did—did see—Claude.”

“Not see Claude! Why it was him she saw first of all!”

“Some one very *like* him was what Juliet said,” amended her husband.

I was too surprised and horrified to speak at first, and could only protest in broken sentences against the inference it was evident Luke drew, from the doubt he expressed as to the identity of Flora’s companion. At last Luke recovered his speech, and with more decision and firmness said,

“You may be very sure, my dear cousin, I would not lightly insinuate such an idea, as I have to my sorrow suggested, neither do I wish now to dilate upon it. I really had not courage to do so to poor Juliet, whom I have

left to enjoy the benefit of the doubt, if there *can* be any on the subject. I trust and pray there may, but still I fear and tremble as I say that, from what I heard, I have more apprehension than hope."

"What! that Flora has not really married Claude?"

"No, I have no doubt he married her when they went away together, but I fear they are not together now."

I felt faint and giddy with horror as Luke said these words; and yet, if true, that would account at once for Flora's strange conduct to Juliet, and all that was most inexplicable in the circumstances that surrounded her; and yet I could not give way at once to the bitter thought of such infamy, of Mr. Crofton's daughter so degraded. So, after a long pause, I entered a protest, saying with parched lips, that almost refused to form the words,

"I daresay Claude may be altered by two years' residence abroad, and become foreign-looking; still, it seems there was sufficient like-

ness to his former self for Juliet to have recognised him."

"She never thought it was Claude till she saw his wife; and even then thought, notwithstanding a certain resemblance, that the alteration was wonderful."

Then, as I kept silence, for my thoughts seemed to crowd too fast upon each other to leave room for utterance, Luke continued, in a solemn tone,

"I am grieved to have distressed you so, Cousin Marian, but it is better that some one in the family should know the truth—or rather, what I apprehend as such; but the fact is, after Juliet and I had made our fruitless visit to that hotel, and found them gone, without a trace of where they might be found, then, without saying anything to Juliet, I made all the inquiries in my power, and heard that the young couple who had been residing there for some weeks past were supposed to be living under a false name, and with great doubts as to their being married at all. The gentleman

was said to be a foreigner of high rank, and the lady as decidedly English ; but who she was, no one knew. They lived entirely to themselves, and saw no one—they seemed to have ample means of expenditure ; and—and that is enough, I think, on this very unpleasant subject.”

“I will not believe it,” I replied, with tears of grief and indignation as I went on. “There is the likeness you mention to poor dear Claude, so I have no doubt it was him himself. I have heard that ‘*on dit*’ is as great a story-teller abroad as in England ; and we all know what strange tales people get up on the least provocation, especially when people have their own reasons for keeping their affairs to themselves, and not telling their exact history to everybody they meet in the course of their travels ; besides, it is not very likely that there should have been another person so like my brother ; and that he and Flora—oh ! I can’t talk about it, it is too horrible !”

“So it is,” said Luke, gravely ; but feelingly

adding, “ and there is nothing within my limited power that I would not give or do to prove the whole a baseless invention ; but when you calmly review the whole subject, I fear you will come to the same conclusion as myself.”

“ Never !” was all my reply, given, I fear, more in determined opposition than as the result of calm reflection.

“ Well, well, we will say no more about it at present, for we shall not mend the matter by so doing. But, remember, when you dispassionately think it over, how utterly impossible it is that your brother Claude could have the money at his command that this man, whoever he may be, is well known to have had.”

“ There are other things still more impossible even, I hope, than that,” returned I, determined to resist all power of conviction as long as it was within the range of human calculation to do so.

Luke said no more—he had fulfilled what he thought an unpleasant duty, and had selected me from the rest of the family to bear the

weight of his communication. He had spared his own wife, on account of her still nearer relationship to poor Claude, and former friendship (though all so rudely shaken of late) with Flora; but me—I was supposed capable of carrying any burden. Little did my obtuse but amiable cousin dream how heavily his revelation—(whether true or not, the bare supposition was horrible!)—fell on my heart. But enough of that, my great grief and concern was all for Keene Crofton—it was of him I thought most; and this dreadful supposition as to the fate of his daughter gave rise to an intense longing of some tidings of the father.

None came of him, however; the Hall remained shut up. I never heard of anyone going there; the servants who lived there at the time Flora went away had all been dismissed at the beginning of the new year—that new year from which I had expected so much! I heard that Mr. John Forest himself had taken up his abode in some of the offices, as he had no doubt orders to do; and with his mother, now an old woman, lived

there, with a couple of stout serving-maids, who, under the old lady's inspection, kept everything, it was rumoured, in the most perfect order in the house; whilst her son exercised a vigilant control over every out-door department, as well as discharged with considerable diligence the office of steward to the estate. It was whispered amongst the dependents on the Hall premises that, were Mr. Forest to marry, he would forfeit his situation at the Hall. But as he seemed, from all accounts, to prefer a bachelor life and the company of his aged mother to that of a young wife, there appeared no chance of any change taking place in the arrangements Mr. Crofton had made.

It was for some time supposed that John Forest knew no more of his master's whereabouts than the rest of the world, but I was inclined (from a few remarks he addressed to Luke Dillon on various occasions) to believe, though he said so little, he knew more than had been at first supposed. Considering the peculiar circumstances under which Mr. Crofton

left his home, he could not have appointed a better guardian to take charge of it in his absence than John Forest. The natural ungraciousness of his speech and manner, proceeding from a morose and taciturn temper and disposition, were united, however, with a species of dogged honesty, that would serve an employer faithfully in the minutest particular; so Mr. Crofton showed his usual sagacity in placing him there. He was, no doubt, "the right man in the right place."

When Luke returned home after his marriage, he happened to see more of this man than he had ever done before, for his old mother, falling ill, wished to see the clergyman of the parish. This desire, which was occasionally repeated, brought Luke once more within the precincts of Crofton Hall. No one had ever been permitted to enter the house before since it had been deserted and shut up, and the orders, it appeared, continued as stringent in that particular as formerly.

John Forest exercised his office of Cerberus

with great satisfaction to himself. He seemed to feel his own importance extremely enhanced by the total exclusion of every other creature, save himself and small household, from the great house. Neither he nor the old woman appeared to feel the solitude of the dreary large uninhabited mansion. He triumphed rather in the downfall of those who had formerly held themselves (as he conceived) so high in that same place, and was much pleased with the contrast thus grimly presented in the present and past occupation, especially when poor Claude held sway there, to his entire exclusion.

One day Luke rather unwittingly asked old Mrs. Forest if she would like a visit from his wife, saying Mrs. Dillon would be glad to come and sit and read or talk to her, if it would amuse her. The ancient dame replied ungraciously—

“ What, Miss Juliet Markham that was ?—for I hear she’s your lady now-a-days—no, none of *them*, by no means, parson, and no offence to you, I humbly hope ; but we mustn’t have no

more Markhams come prying about in this house. There have been one too many already."

Of course the offer of Juliet's company was not repeated after that, but Luke, in his indefatigable goodness, continued his ministrations to the old woman the same. She was not a pleasant person by any means. Still she had her good points, and, in her hard stubborn way, was honest and conscientious, as far as worldly matters went. She had, too, her own stern, uncompromising religious opinions, of which her own peculiar election, and the condemnation of the greater part of her fellow-creatures, formed the most soothing and pleasing subject of contemplation in her own mind. The one soft part of her nature was comprised in the strong instinct of maternal affection felt for her one only child, the son with whom she lived, and who, it may be said, returned her love, as far as it was in his rugged nature to entertain such a sentiment.

To both mother and son Luke's visits became acceptable. He had entirely won upon their

esteem by the force of his own natural character. They saw he practised as he preached, and his own self-denying life was in accordance with his doctrine. Luke was just the man to win his way with them, and, even after the old woman's partial recovery, at their request he continued his visits at the Hall. It appeared he was far more popular both with mother and son than the more conciliating and courteous little doctor, who had been also called in to minister to Mrs. Forest's bodily ailments, whilst Luke attended to her more important interests. The conversational talents Mr. Jones exercised with so good an effect in my step-mother's case, were of no avail with old Mrs. Forest; neither gossip nor flattery had the slightest charm for her—his love of talking only made him obnoxious to the stern old dame, who cared so little for the outer world, or the favourable opinion of others. So, as soon as the case permitted, Mr. Jones was dismissed from further attendance on old Mrs. Forest, whilst the poor little man had not even enjoyed the satisfaction of picking up and

bringing away the slightest crumb of information in regard to the Crofton family, wherewith to regale any interested inquirers amongst his other patients.

It became clear to Luke—before whom John Forest and his mother spoke with less reserve than in the case of the doctor—that with all their zeal and honesty in Mr. Crofton's service, there was no strong personal regard. Still the Forest family had served the Croftons for past generations as agents and stewards, and were therefore staunch adherents to their interests. And although Flora Crofton had failed to make a favourable impression, notwithstanding all her youth and beauty, and winning ways, on old Mrs. Forest, still she most bitterly condemned and resented the conduct which had taken the young girl from her father's house and intended husband, and cast such a slur and slight upon the name she honoured.

It was seldom, it may be supposed, that the subject was named in Luke's presence. For although he was not one of the despised Mark-

hams himself, he was nearly connected with them, and had even married into the family, of whom the old woman observed, that she believed young Mrs. Dillon, the parson's wife, was quite of another sort to that scapegrace lad that took away Miss Flora, and his fine do-nothing, want-everything mother, Madame Markham, up at the Manor-house. With all her reticence, however, one day Mrs. Forest told Luke a piece of news, which, as he was not bound to secrecy, he hastened to impart both to his wife and me. This was that some weeks after the Dillons' return home, to her son's extreme surprise he one day received a mysterious packet, and that packet enclosed notes to the exact amount—or it might have been the very same notes—as those missing through Claude's carelessness or culpability.

I believe the revelation was made to Luke by way of giving him satisfaction; and no doubt he *was* glad to hear it, though he could not feel unmixed gratification, without knowing how far Claude had been implicated either in the ab-

straction or the restitution. Both Juliet and I warmly gave it as our joint opinion that he had had nothing to do with either; but Luke's plain sense, unbiassed by sisterly affection, made him think otherwise.

"We all know," said he, "that the money was in his hands, and that he never paid it into the bank, as he declared he should do; but at all events, let us rejoice that, even if he abstracted it for a temporary purpose—bad as that was—he has had the conscience to restore it at last."

We could not get Luke to see the transaction in any other light; and no doubt it was the most natural explanation to put on the whole affair, but it left us as much in the dark as ever, for not a scrap of information could we glean as to the present sender, any more than the former spender, of the missing money.

Nothing more was said in public upon the subject, as all had been at Mr. Crofton's desire (to save me pain as far as he could) so hushed up and arranged, that all those to whom John Forest had spoken on the subject at the time it

occurred believed the accusation had arisen from some mistake, which had afterwards been rectified.

For myself, I could not help connecting this return of the lost notes with the visit Juliet had paid to Flora and her observation to her as to the construction that might be put by others on witnessing the luxury in which she and Claude seemed to be living. But, turn it which way I could, it was equally unsatisfactory.

During all this time I had never heard from my friend Mary—Lady Manwairing. After the family break-up she wrote to me no more. Perhaps it was as well ; we could have nothing in common after that ; and everything was too painful to go on writing in an ordinary way, as if nothing had occurred. I often longed, but dared not question Luke as to whether he had any news of the absentee at the Hall ; and I felt sure, unless John Forest or his mother volunteered the information, he would ask no questions respecting their employer. At last, however, one day Luke came home whilst I was

with Juliet and asked me—"Did you know, Marian, how much worse Sir Edward Manwairing has been of late?"

"Oh! no. Are there any tidings of him and his wife?—I never hear from her now."

"I thought perhaps you might. Old Mrs. Forest was unusually communicative this morning. She told me Sir Edward Manwairing had not been expected to live all this last winter and spring, and they spent it at Lisbon. But he has taken a change now for the better, and it is said a sea voyage is more likely to be of service to him than anything else. So they are fitting up a ship on purpose to convey him with his wife and every comfort and luxury on board that may be required. They are bound first for Australia, to try the climate there; and then, I hear, they talk of South America. In fact, they have the world before them where to choose."

"Ah," said I, "they wish to make a long absence, then, from their own portion of the world."

"They talk of three years, I hear." Then

after a pause Luke looked up from the book which he had taken up, and said—"I forgot one great part of Mrs. Forest's communication, and that is, our old friend, their master, goes with them."

"What, Mr. Crofton!"

"Yes, Mr. Crofton; so, as they say, there is no chance of his coming home for a very long time."

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER that last piece of news, any restlessness (founded on some undefined hope I might unconsciously have indulged) died out. I cannot say that I had expected ever to see Keene Crofton again, but still it had been *possible*. Now that it was so no longer, I suddenly became perfectly calm and resigned to my future lot in life. I fancied I had been so before, but I then found there had been a little lingering hope that some bright day I might hear of him again at the Hall; and though we could never be to each other what we had been, still we might have settled down into the limits of a calm steady friendship, which might yet have been renewed after the pain of late events had become softened by time. Such, at least, *had*

been my dream—though I had not acknowledged it even to myself.

A sorrow that is perfectly hopeless brings its own cure—we do not fight against the inevitable; so if my own dream of happiness was at an end, I must try and find what consolation I could from that of others. Juliet claimed much of my sympathy just then, with the dawning hope of a new joy, which the following summer confirmed, when a little lovely girl baby was born to the young pair at the Parsonage. It might have been the child of the whole village, so great was the joy and interest excited in all around by the appearance of the little stranger. As for me, I felt all the due importance of my auntship, and was delighted with the new interest opened out to me in life by the birth of Juliet's child. I do not think her mother was as much impressed with the importance of the new arrival as the rest of the world, nor did she cordially respond to the congratulations offered to her, on having attained the dignity of being a grandmamma.

"It makes one feel so old and ugly," she ungraciously remarked, on the occasion of one of Mr. Jones' visits, in which he brought the most favourable tidings of the progress of the young mother and her infant.

"I do not know what it may make *you feel*, madam, I only know it makes all around you regard you with a feeling of astonishment as a grandmamma!" said the little Doctor, labouring to give a happy turn to his speech, and soothe the self-love of his patroness.

Miss Alethea looked with even less toleration on the poor little child; she seemed to regard it as a piece of wilful extravagance, that Luke and Juliet should dare have a baby.

"Such an expense!" said the ancient spinster, shaking her head. "From first to last I can't think how they will manage with a family, so poor as they are already; why, there will be another servant to begin with, and a nursery besides!"

I hastened to calm her fears on that head, saying how delighted the three servants, old

Mrs. Moore at the head, were to have the charge of this precious baby; and that there was to be no additional nurse hired, for they were all to be nurses in turn, adding that I was also anxious to be duly enrolled amongst them. Mrs. Markham tossed her head with a little contemptuous gesture peculiar to herself and said,

“Of all the fusses in the world nothing strikes me as so absurd as that which is made over every first child in a family, as if people could not care for their children without fancying their own baby is the finest that ever was seen, and the most beautiful, and the most amiable; after all, it is only a species of self-love, because the child is their own.”

“Well, that is a new definition of maternal love!” said Miss Ramsay perversely; “but you must know best, and that accounts for your thinking Claude in the right all this time,” she added most thoughtlessly, thereby bringing down the storm of ill-temper which had been for some time gathering in her sister’s breast.

However, after a time Mrs. Markham condescended to visit her grandchild ; and when she did so there was enough womanly feeling in her heart to make her kiss it very tenderly, and say it was a nice soft little thing, though by no means the finest baby she had ever seen in the course of her life. Poor Juliet was quite satisfied with her mother's concession, for she confided to me she was afraid her mother might not fancy the child, and she knew her Aunt Alethea hated the sight and sound of babies, so I was told to keep it out of her way.

The christening was a grand day, and happy were we all on the occasion. Even Mrs. Markham seemed contented with her hoary honours, and graciously consented to present the child at the baptismal font. Luke tried very hard not to look too pleased and proud on the occasion, so he put on an extra solemn countenance ; but Juliet and I detected his real state of feeling beneath it all, and rejoiced in it accordingly. It was a pleasant sight to watch the young father when he received his child into

his arms, signed the cross on her infant brow, and gave her the name of Alice Mary.

That year passed very peaceably away ; the little addition to our family party gave us all so much to do and think about. For Juliet did not neglect any of her former duties—she only shared them a little more with others ; so there was plenty of employment for everybody. Mrs. Markham became reconciled to the fact of being a grandmamma, so long as no one congratulated her on that circumstance.

Miss Alethea ignored altogether the existence of a baby at the Parsonage, or perhaps, when she did not see the child, forgot all about it. At all events, the insignificance of its arrival was completely overshadowed by the splendour of another similar family occurrence, and the announcement that an heir was born to the house of Ramsay. *That* was an event worth being chronicled, and the letter (written by Lord Ramsay himself to his aunt) was triumphantly produced and read as often, or rather more often, than the occasion called for.

With strange perversity, this rival arrival of another family baby made Mrs. Markham suddenly take an extra interest in her daughter's infant, and behave in respect to it much more like a doting grandmother than she had previously seemed inclined to do. So, when Miss Ramsay read details from letters of Mrs. Charles Ramsay relating to the perfections of the heir of their house, Mrs. Markham would make slighting comments on the same, and observe she was quite sure little Alice was a much nicer child in every way. So the two sisters fought their baby battles on every available occasion, and amused themselves by so doing.

An event, however, of much deeper importance, in respect to our individual selves at the old home, was impending, and came upon us there with startling surprise, of a more or less pleasurable character. The first announcement filled me with a strange wondering feeling of undefined joy. It was that my brother Piers was coming home. I could not fancy it—that this long-absent brother should again take his

place amongst us in the familiar position of every-day life, seemed far too strange to be true.

The news did not come directly to ourselves. Mr. Jackson, the family lawyer, was empowered to make the communication first of all to my step-mother. But in so doing it seemed nothing more or less than a notice to quit the pleasant home she had occupied so long. When this was made apparent, as we all met in family conclave on the occasion, I could not help putting in a word, as nearest relative to my absent brother.

“Surely, Mr. Jackson, this cannot be Mr. Markham’s intention—he cannot wish us all to turn out of our house ?”

The lawyer only shrugged his shoulders in a deprecating way, and said his instructions were to let the present tenant or occupant know that the house would henceforth be required for the proprietor, Mr. Markham, and his family. His family !—true, I had for the moment forgotten that Piers was a married man, and that it was

but natural he should wish to have his house to himself and his wife.

It is hardly possible to give an idea of the blank consternation with which this new turn of affairs filled my step-mother. It was a state of things, it seemed, had never been most remotely contemplated by her. That Piers was settled in India for the rest of his life seemed just as natural and proper as that she should be settled at the family place for the rest of her life. I felt severely grieved for her, she was so entirely overwhelmed with the unexpected tidings. It was very pleasant to me to hear that my long-loved and absent brother Piers was about to return and take up his abode amongst us again; but then my joy was damped when I thought how little I knew of that brother now, and how entire a stranger his wife was to me.

We had three months to prepare for our removal, for Mr. Jackson said, although Mr. Markham was already on his way, it was his intention to spend two or three months in Paris,

where his wife had relations ; and that Mrs. Markham, now at the Manor-house, might have time to look out for another residence.

I could not help speculating a good deal as to what my own lot might be in this new phase of domestic affairs ; and yet I felt almost selfish in thinking so much about myself, when I saw the state of distress into which my step-mother was brought by the whole transaction. At the first mention of my brother's intentions, and consequent instructions for her removal from the Manor-house, Mrs. Markham appeared to think it could not be true—that there must be some misunderstanding in the case, or that she might in some way substantiate some claim to be allowed to retain her present home, the charms of which appeared to increase in proportion as her prospect of remaining there decreased.

When Mrs. Markham had fully ascertained that she had no ground whatever to go upon, and that she must relinquish the place where she had lived so long to its real and rightful

possessor, then the current of her feelings took another turn, and the most bitter anger and indignation succeeded her late state of bewildered incredulity. There was no one, however, on whom to vent the overflowings of her wrath. Mr. Jackson was only the agent for another ; and as her stepson, who was the real culprit, was at that time out of reach of letters or interviews (being, as it was supposed, on the high seas), so any expression of her extreme discomposure and offended feeling fell harmless to the ground.

After a while this state of mind gave place to another, and that was perhaps the most distressing for those around to witness, and that was the most intense dejection of spirits, relieved occasionally by bits of violent irritation and bitter complaining. For this last unhappy state of feeling, which quite preyed upon her health, we had to call in the assistance of her medical friend, Mr. Jones, under whose treatment she began at length to revive a little.

Miss Ramsay, of course, prepared also to take

her departure, and many were the comments she made on the occasion; but what she was going to do with herself on her removal from the Manor-house, was at that time unknown to any of us. I did not think the sisters were likely to set up their future abode together—they had been drifting further and further apart for several months past—in fact, ever since poor Claude's unhappy business, his Aunt Alethea had seemed on less comfortable terms with his mother than before. It was hardly to be expected, therefore, that when there would be neither profit nor pleasure to be gained by remaining with her sister, that Miss Ramsay would care to share a home with Mrs. Markham, and where it would no doubt be expected that she should furnish an equal contribution to the expenses of the same. To live at, and to manage for the Manor-house, had suited Miss Alethea very well for the time, but I think she had began to weary of it a little when this unexpected break-up came. She chose, however, to take high ground on the occasion, and in-

veighed bitterly to me against the extreme selfishness of her sister, who could never, she said, at any time think of any one but herself, and the effect events might exercise over her own individual feelings ; adding,

“ Charlotte always was the most selfish person in the world ; and I think she grows more so every year she lives ! It is all very well to have a prudent regard for oneself, and to look after number one to a certain extent, but really to forget, as Charlotte does, that there are any other numbers in the world besides, is going a little too far. She seems to expect your brother is to remain in India for her especial benefit, or, coming home, is to make over the family place to her. I tell her plainly it is quite absurd ; and all she answers is, that I know nothing at all about her or her feelings. As if no one else had any feeling at all ! Why, here I must pack up and go, too, and look out for a new home, when I had never thought much about moving again. And then, there is yourself, Marian—what is to become of you now ?

I don't know whether my sister means you to live with her or not—do you?"

No, I did not. Nothing had been said about me, in any way; and as I was a dependent on my brother's bounty hitherto, I must wait till his pleasure was made known concerning me. I would not fret about my future in the meantime. I did not doubt things would arrange themselves in some way, or I could make myself useful in case of a "needs-be." Luke and Juliet had both warmly pressed me to make my home with them; but I could not settle anything till I had heard from Piers. I had hitherto confidingly trusted my future in his hands, and I wished to retain the same sisterly faith in his good and kind intentions towards me. A few years before I had no difficulty in realizing them to a large extent, but since his marriage a barrier had seemed to have sprung up between us. He very seldom wrote to me; he never sent me little tokens of his recollection, which had been so valuable to me, as coming from him, and as proofs of his affection. A few hurried lines,

with many months between, and latterly more than a year had elapsed since any tidings were received from him, and those had been to announce some event of interest to himself, such as the birth of a child, and with little appearance of anxiety respecting my individual surroundings.

Well, so it was, and things remained in that state for some weeks after Mr. Jackson had made his first announcement. We all and each of us began to look up our several possessions, preparatory to removing them to our future homes, wherever they might be. I fancied Mrs. Markham seemed to incline towards a residence in Thorpe, but she gave no hint of a wish that I should accompany her thither. She said, however, that probably her first move would be to the sea-side. She appeared to include no one in her future plans, but to think of and act for herself alone. The only person in any way admitted to her confidence was Miss Jones, who trotted backwards and forwards as obediently to her commands as a well-trained little poodle might have done.



Happily Mrs. Markham herself seemed to be regaining some degree of equanimity, and to have made up her mind to make the best of things as they were. As to my own perplexities, they were brought to a satisfactory conclusion about that time. I received a letter from Piers, dated from Paris. It was short but kind; it expressed his pleasure at the idea of seeing me again so soon, and making his wife (the Pamela of whom I had only as yet heard that she was beautiful and charming) known to me as a sister. Of course (he said) I should continue in my own home (as he called it) as heretofore, and, he hoped, never leave it till I changed, for one more exclusively my own. Piers sent civil remembrances to his step-mother, with whom he seemed to have no wish to quarrel, and love to Juliet, of whose marriage to our cousin Luke Dillon he had been duly apprised; though that cousin was still a stranger to him, he hoped they should soon be good friends and good neighbours.

It was all that could have been desired, and

my heart revived under the cheering influence of its kind words and intentions. My step-mother received my brother's remembrances with something bordering on a sneer, but only remarked, she supposed Piers Markham was not much altered since he left England so many years ago, for she had always heard India was not the place to polish or improve anyone. Then, in reference to my own prospects, she said—

“Of course I knew you would remain here, or I would have offered you a home with me, for you would not have been in my way ; but it is quite right and proper for you to be in your brother's house. I wonder what sort of a person his wife is ?”

I wondered also, but came to the conclusion that we should get on very well together. All I knew of her was, she was the only daughter of a Mr. Deleroix, a banker, and that Piers had married her the first year of her coming to India —that she was very young at the time, and, report said, very pretty. It was from my former

friend, Mr. Digby, that I had heard these family tidings ; and as I recalled all he had said about my brother and his wife to my recollection, I could not help speculating as to what had become of that same Mr. Percival Digby, and whether he, too, like his friend, had taken a wife to himself. It seemed quite strange that I should be likely to hear of him again, he had so entirely vanished out of the world in which I lived ; and yet he was the only person I had ever met with, who brought me news from that far land of the brother whom I had once loved above all others in the world. I tried then to recall something of that same feeling of intense sisterly affection with which I had been wont in years long past to regard my brother Piers ; but, try as I would, I was obliged to confess that in my heart of hearts it was now Claude that, as a brother, was dearest to me—yes, that Claude whose undisciplined conduct had blighted all my fair prospects in life ; *he* was still, although it was nearly four years since he had left us—he was still my own best-beloved bro-

ther. I knew him so well ; there was a something so winning about Claude, even his very failings endeared him to me the more.

My memory then tried to conjure up a vivid recollection of Piers, but there was something hard and rough, though ever kindly to me, in the vision that appeared—something to be feared, as well as loved, in my eldest brother. Besides, I was now eight-and-twenty, and had been but a child of twelve when he went away ; so I could not bring back the child-like feeling with which I had loved Piers, sixteen long years ago. Alas ! he would be a stranger to me, and his wife must ever be the nearest and dearest to his heart, and he had his little children also.

At the thought of them my spirits revived. There would at least be plenty for me to love in the new household at the Manor-house, and child-love is soon won in return. Thus, with so many hopes in them, I must be happy, let time have done its inevitable work both in me and my brother. So I tried to look without apprehension on the meeting which drew so near.

CHAPTER XIII.

BEFORE that meeting actually took place a strange surprise awaited us all. It was the week before Piers and his family were expected. Mrs. Markham had settled to leave the next morning. I was to spend the intervening week at the Parsonage. Miss Ramsay was going, but she had not as yet declared where—all we knew it was to be in an opposite direction to her sister's. All had been bustle and confusion at the Manor-house for some days past. I had been surprised to see that my step-mother, instead of becoming, as I feared to see her, hopelessly overcome as the time for her departure drew near, had, on the contrary, appeared to gain in spirits and cheerfulness every day, and seemed even to find a pleasure in send-

ing her various packages of china, and pretty and ornamental things, besides quantities of clothes and sundries, to some receptacle in Thorpe, where I supposed they were to await her return from the sea coast, which was now named as the first place to which she was going. I had nothing to do myself but remain quietly where I was, and leave my things in their accustomed places. I therefore stole out of the house on the morning I have mentioned, with the determination of avoiding all the turmoil at home, and spending a quiet day at the Parsonage, either with Juliet or in her nursery. I found her happily disengaged that morning, so we devoted it to little Alice Mary, who, now a year old, was beginning to make her first steps into the world; and her mamma and I were very proud of the progress that we were able to record each day, as we repeated the interesting experiment.

Our simple luncheon was just over (for Juliet dined late on Luke's account), and the tray being removed, we summoned Miss Alice to take her

daily walking exercise. Whilst we were busily and happily engaged, and the child tottering between us, as we knelt on the carpet at a suitable distance from each other, the door opened abruptly, and Mrs. Markham appeared.

"Oh! mamma, do come here," said Juliet, hastily springing up to welcome her mother. "I am so glad to see you! Now you will be able to see how baby is come on in her walking before you go away. Just please come and stand here by me. Now, Alice, my pet, walk to grandmamma."

"Grandmamma indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Markham, with her peculiar toss. "How sick I am of that horrid word! I think it is the very ugliest that ever was invented."

And then she walked past her daughter and child, and threw herself wearily on to the sofa.

"You are tired, mamma dear," said Juliet, so much softer and gentler than she had been in former days. "I quite forgot how much you must have had to do to-day; and dear baby will only be in the way. Ring the bell, please,

Marian, and Martha will come and fetch her."

I did as desired, and the child was taken away, whilst Juliet fetched a glass of wine for her mother, and then sat down dutifully by her on the sofa. Mrs. Markham drank the wine, looked round, and saw that little Alice was gone, and seemed refreshed as she said,

"I am really glad of a little rest and peace, and there can be none when children are always in the room."

"Baby is gone, mamma," said Juliet, "and you shall not see or hear her again till you ask for her; and now"—coming and sitting down by her mother, Juliet went on—"now tell me all about your journey to-morrow, mamma, and whether there is anything Luke and I can do for you whilst you are away? Do you know, I often feel afraid, mamma, that you will find yourself lonely when you are really gone, and by yourself too in that place all alone."

"I think so too, Juliet."

"Well, then! do take some one with you, mamma. I am sure Marian would go in a

minute, if you wished for her. Or—or perhaps you would not mind Miss Jones, mamma?" said Juliet, hesitating a little, as if taking a liberty in suggesting Miss Jones's companionship.

"You are not so far out there, Juliet, in your recommendation," replied her mother, with a little half laugh; adding, "But it happens I have selected my companion."

"I am glad of it, mamma—who is it?" said Juliet quietly.

"Only *Dr. Jones* instead of his sister."

"*Doctor Jones!*" replied the daughter.

"Yes, he has taken out his diploma, and is now *Doctor Jones*."

"Ah," said Juliet, still unsuspecting, "but surely you are not going to have him with you for any time, mamma, though you may wish to see him after your journey."

"Well, I suppose it will be the journey of life with us now, Juliet," said Mrs. Markham composedly.

"What do you mean?" said her daughter, with a sudden start and flush; and then, look-

ing very pale, "I do not comprehend you, mamma?"

"You are rather dull then, I fear, Juliet; are you equally so, Marian?"

"I fear I understand you," said I, feeling both sorry and ashamed.

"Oh, mamma! mamma! you cannot mean that you are going to *marry—that* Mr. Jones?"

"Softly, Juliet; do not say anything you may be sorry for, for I have married him this morning."

Juliet sprang to her feet, drew herself up to her full height, and paced rapidly two or three times up and down the small room; then Mrs. Markham, or rather Mrs. Jones, looked up and said in a sneering tone,

"May I ask Mrs. Dillon what all this fuss is about? Why may not I marry Mr. Jones, as well as you marry Luke Dillon?—one is quite as good as the other, I imagine! Only I suppose Mr. Jones has better means of supporting a wife than your husband has."

Then Juliet stopped suddenly, and came up

to her mother and sat down again by her and said,

“It was the surprise, mamma. I never dreamt of such a thing—that you should marry the doctor you thought so little of.”

“I beg your pardon, Juliet, I thought a great deal of him, and have, I hope, proved it. Not that I should have married him, I dare say, if I had not been so shamefully turned out of my home. All *your* brother’s doing,” turning rather fiercely to me; “but as it is, I am doing the best I can for myself. Dr. Jones has got a comfortable and pleasant house to take me to —there is none I like so well in Thorpe. He has also saved a considerable sum of money, which he settles unreservedly upon me, as well as his house property. He will relinquish his profession, and devote his whole time and attention to me. I cannot get on at all without constant medical attendance. I am so fearfully delicate, and I could not afford a doctor under present circumstances, and I owe Dr. Jones a long bill, so I have settled everything.”

Mrs. Jones then leant back on the sofa, having recited her various arts and performances, and the motives leading to them, seeming perfectly satisfied with herself and all she had done. Juliet and I looked at each other in vacant astonishment, neither of us caring or daring to speak. As this silence went on, it seemed to irritate the bride, who, looking first at her daughter then at me, said haughtily,

“In most cases of this kind it is customary to offer good wishes at least, if not congratulations.”

“Oh, mamma!” said poor Juliet, almost crying, “I really cannot congratulate you, for I think that this is such a wretched marriage for you, and you had much better not have married at all.”

This candid speech brought down a torrent of angry reproaches upon Juliet’s head, with many slighting remarks upon her husband, his family and want of fortune; and then she wound up all by saying,

“Your undutiful speech as to my marriage,

convinces me more and more how much cant and pretence there is in all your fine and religious professions! You are angry at my marrying a doctor, because you think he is beneath me in rank; whereas you pretend to condescend to men of low estate; not that I consider a clever medical man beneath anyone in the kingdom, but it is all your pride and vanity that is hurt by having such a step-father as I think right and proper to give you; and if you do not choose to receive him with due respect, I will never speak to you or enter your doors again."

"Oh! mamma! mamma!" said Juliet, then really crying in her distress, "do not let there be any more hard words between us. If you are really comfortable and happy with Dr. Jones, both Luke and I shall be very glad to see him here with you, whenever you please to come; only you have so taken me by surprise, mamma, that you must forgive my not being prepared for such news."

Mrs. Markham then suffered herself to be ap-

peased, and accepted her daughter's submission. She told us her husband was coming to fetch her that same afternoon, and they were going to make a charming little honeymoon tour, beginning with the sea place she had already told us of. Mrs. Jones laughed as she related a scene she had had with the Honourable Alethea, as she scoffingly called her sister, who was as much in the dark as to her proceedings and intentions as the rest of the world.

Mrs. Jones quite triumphed in the idea of the mortification her marriage would inflict on all the Ramsay family. It seemed quite to delight her when she thought of it, adding that Alethea had been in treaty about some small house in London, which Lord Ramsay had promised to rent for her; and had kept her proceedings a secret from her, lest she should have wished to participate in the benefit, and make her home with her.

"And now," said the bride, with a sneer, "she is half afraid his lordship will withdraw his countenance from her, seeing what bad company she has been keeping here."

Then my step-mother turned her attention kindly to me, and invited me to visit her in Thorpe on her return, saying I should find it a pleasant change from the large family party at the Manor-house; and so she went chatting pleasantly on, about various matters, till at length we heard the sound of wheels approaching at a rapid pace, and soon after a handsome new carriage, with a pair of good horses, drew up at the little gate of the Parsonage. Then Mrs. Jones leant forward, somewhat eagerly, to look into the carriage, and drew back, saying in a disappointed tone,

“Oh! the doctor is not there!—the naughty man, he promised to come and fetch me himself, but I suppose his courage failed.”

“I did not think we were so formidable,” replied Juliet, with a half smile.

Her mother only said carelessly,

“No, there is nothing very alarming about you certainly, but I suppose just to-day he feels a little bashful; but we will come and see you as soon as we return.”

And with that promise the bride arose, kissed us both, and swept gracefully out of the room. As Juliet and I followed her to the little garden gate, I observed that her dress was of an unusually splendid texture. I had observed before that she was somewhat elaborately attired, but knowing that she had been to Thorpe that morning, I did not think much about it. Now in the full light of the summer afternoon I felt convinced I gazed upon the wedding-dress itself. As she came up to the carriage, I recognised Mr. Jones's old servant, who was standing holding the door open, whilst a new coachman occupied the box of the carriage.

"Why didn't your master come with the carriage, Dixon?" asked the lady of the equipage, rather imperiously.

"Please, ma'am," said the man, almost trembling with the intensity of his efforts to be properly respectful, both in the name of his master and himself, to the "Honourable Mrs. Jones," "please, ma'am, master sends his respectful compliments, and will do himself the honour to wait upon you at the station."

"Oh ! very well ; then drive there at once."

Juliet and I walked back into the house as the carriage whirled rapidly away, and we did not speak till we were again seated in the little sitting-room, and Juliet had taken up a sock she was knitting for little Alice, and had done a few rows, and then she only said,

"I am glad Luke did not come in whilst mamma was here."

"And I am glad the doctor kept away for the present."

"Yes, so am ; I we shall all get used in time to this new state of things, but it seems very strange at present."

"It might have been worse," said I.

"Yes, poor Mr. Jones is a good harmless little man enough. I wonder whatever induced him to think of marrying mamma ! and I cannot fancy her a bride."

"No, it does not seem very suitable to a grandmamma. No wonder she objects to the name ! but I hope she will be happy as Mrs. Jones, at all events."

I had to go back and encounter Miss Ramsay after that. But she did not say much to me. She evidently intended to cut the whole Markham connection, when she had once turned her back upon the old home. So she only remarked, she supposed I had "heard of her sister's disgrace." It was "all of a piece," she added—I suppose she alluded to Claude—but she did not particularise. She told me the next morning she was going first to pay a visit to the Charles Ramsays; that she had invited herself there, till her own house should be ready; and should in all probability be asked by Lord Ramsay to stay with them in Grosvenor Square. She was very full of herself and her great relations, and entertained me with an account of the new Lady Ramsay's pedigree, which, it appeared, she had been getting up in readiness. Our parting was a very cool one, and when she got into the little old carriage that was to take her to the station, I felt sure I had seen the last of the Honourable Alethea Ramsay. After that I betook myself to the dear little happy Parsonage; and then

there was a week of quiet happiness—very busy but very uneventful; and then I came back to my old home to receive my stranger brother, and all his unknown family.

When the morning of that eventful day dawned at last, I was vexed and perplexed with feeling in myself that I did not welcome it with more cheerfulness and hope. On the contrary, I was painfully conscious of a depressing weight on my spirits, arising in part from an apprehension I could not overcome, that I should find my once dearly loved brother Piers so altered and estranged, that we should neither of us be able to recognize each other, and that a renewal of our old affection would be impossible. I fled to every sort of employment I could devise to drive away these busy and importunate thoughts. Most unwelcome intruders they were, and I blamed myself bitterly that they *would* come.

However, the day wore on. The old house had been brightened up to the highest pitch of polish that was possible, and of which it was capable, with its old scanty furniture, from

which its late mistress had taken away and selected all the best articles, calling them her own property. Of such as remained the old servants and myself made the most. Everything gleamed bright and clean, and the old oak floors were fresh polished, and shone like looking-glass. The open windows admitted the sweet scent of summer flowers in the garden beneath, and the roses and honeysuckles clustered round the casements. Piers had desired that any servants who wished to stay should remain, and they would make what future additions they saw fit afterwards to the household. There were but two to take advantage of the permission thus accorded ; but with their help, everything was satisfactorily arranged long before the arrival of the expected party. The rooms which had belonged to my father and mother were prepared for my brother and his wife, and the old nurseries, which were not far distant, duly got ready for the new little family of which I neither knew the names or number. The tables were spread above and below for the refresh-

ment of great and small on their arrival, fresh fruit and fresh flowers had been gathered in abundance, and the latter formed the chief ornament of every habitable room in the old house.

All the preparations were concluded at last, and at the end of that long summer's day I sat down to watch and wait. If Juliet could have joined me, her firmer, stronger spirit would have been the greatest comfort that day; but she was unfortunately absent. She had long promised to attend a school festival given by some friends a few miles distant, and neither Luke nor Juliet could be easily spared on such an occasion, so I would not urge her coming to help me that day, or express the longing desire I had for her presence.

At last the clock struck eight, and then I knew they might come any moment; so with a beating heart and listening ears I took up my position in the drawing-room, all sweet and gay with the flowers I had arranged, and felt ready to receive—Piers and Pamela!—the

names sounded strange, for we had not been much in the habit of talking of either, and of "Pamela" I had hitherto only thought as "Piers' wife;" but now she was coming with her separate name and identity!

Well, wheels were heard at last. I ran to the hall door close by. Two railway cabs drew their slow lengths along; the ascent was rather steep, but the summit was soon gained, the level road rapidly passed, and the carriages stood at the door of the old home. It was getting dusk, but I saw quickly enough it was the tall form of my brother Piers who first stepped from the carriage. He stood for a moment on the threshold, and, as he did so, he reverently lifted his hat with an upward glance, and thus displayed more fully his dark embrowned face; whilst I recognised, in the quick eager look he then cast all around, the same determined expression in the eyes, and on the set features, that I had been used to love and to obey in the days of my childhood. I drew back for a moment, for he had turned again to the carriage

to help his companion to descend. A tall, fair, young-looking woman, almost a girl still, was the first person I saw, and who I knew must be his wife ; but I could only judge imperfectly by that light of her claims to the beauty of which I had heard ; and then three little sleepy children—two girls and a boy—were placed one by one on the steps of the house. After that I came forward to meet my brother and his family, but hardly knew what was said or done in the overwhelming feeling of the moment. I can only remember that, as Piers took me in his strong arms, and kissed me almost as fervently as when we parted, all my misgivings seemed to vanish, and my heart to melt, and respond with loving welcome, for I felt it was indeed my brother who was returned to me.

“ How sweet!—how charming! ” were the first words I heard Pamela utter, after the silent embrace she gave me on our introduction, and this little sentence was spoken on entering the room I had been so busy in preparing for her reception.

I echoed the words in my heart as I looked then on her fair face, and thought to myself, "How sweet and charming!"

Oh! the delight of feeling all clouds of distrust and apprehension clear away, as they did that evening as I looked on the countenances of my brother and his wife, fully revealed to my anxious gaze by the light of the lamp! I saw then that Pamela was no longer actually beautiful, or even so very young, as I had imagined. Still, Piers looked old enough to be her father; and there was a transparent, lily-like look about her face and figure, which always reminded me of that fragrant and fragile flower. The more I looked at Piers, the stronger grew the resemblance to the dearly-loved brother of my girlish recollection, and by the end of that evening the sixteen years of separation seemed to have melted away, and the days of childhood to have returned.

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE is nothing strikes me more forcibly than the strange ease with which we accustom ourselves to an entire change of circumstances, and adopt new habits and ways with new people. Thus in a very short time it seemed to me as of Piers and Pamela had been living at the Manor-house all the days of their lives, instead of their pleasant rule there being only a thing of yesterday ; and I could hardly believe that all the calm and comfort I enjoyed in my old residence with them had been so lately preceded by the turmoil which had marked the departure of Mrs. Markham and Ramsay.

I was very happy with my brother and his wife. Piers had a strongly-marked character,

of which the great point was its extreme reality. A sort of straightforward honesty marked every word and action of his life. He might be a little deficient in outward polish, and perhaps occasionally too direct and plain in speech to suit very fastidious people; but rough as he might sometimes appear, it was only the outward man; he could be as tender as he was true when the occasion called for it; but this very tenderness of feeling he often concealed by the bluntness of his speech.

I found he had taken leave of India and his post there for good, and parted with his shares in a bank he had helped to establish. He was by no means a rich man, for he had sacrificed a great deal in so doing. But he considered that his wife's health, and much of her happiness, were likely to be sacrificed by remaining in India, and he took his resolution accordingly. They had lost two children, and the eldest was of an age to send to England, and Pamela was fretting over the prospect either of parting with the delicate boy, or leaving her husband to

bring him herself to England. Under the circumstances, Piers made a sudden determination, which restored peace and happiness to all, and brought them without delay to England, delighted with the idea of inhabiting the old home, which he so fondly remembered and described.

Pamela was quite worthy of her husband's devotion, for with all her gentleness of manner, and fragility of appearance, she had considerable strength of mind, with the most unselfish as well as affectionate heart. We soon became great friends, but it was not till after some weeks and months of intimacy that she spoke of our mutual friend Mr. Digby, and said she had become best acquainted with me through him, for Piers' recollection was of a child, and his that of a woman.

"And just such a one as I have found you to be," she added, very kindly.

She then told me they were in hopes that he would come to England the following year, and that if he did come he would be much with

them. I knew what she was thinking of, but I felt quite sure in myself that it could never be—even if Mr. Digby still wished it—as I knew both Piers and Pamela desired. But I did not distress myself in anticipating annoyances that possibly might never come, although Pamela told me my former friend was still unmarried, and, she added, “quite unchanged in his opinion regarding you—insensible as you are.”

After a time Dr. and Mrs. Jones came back from their wedding tour, and as it seemed to be her good pleasure to be on amiable terms with all her late husband’s family, no one opposed the flow of her good intentions. If it had been only for Juliet’s sake, we should all have desired the same. Piers did not hesitate to say he liked his former step-mother much better *out* of the family than in it, and as Dr. Jones seemed a good sort of man in his way, harmless and respectable, he should have seen no reason for forbidding the banns. Piers appeared to care as little for unsuitableness of position in the choice his step-mother had chosen to make as he had

for the rank of the Ramsay family, when it pleased his father to marry into it. Juliet was glad that her eldest brother looked upon her mother's foolish act (as she and Luke considered it) with so much indulgence—it might have been perhaps better termed indifference—when he merely said she had a right to please herself, and he had no intention of quarrelling with her for so doing.

I was rather anxious as to how Juliet's husband and his cousin might get on, and was pleased to find, in spite of my misgivings, that Piers and Luke soon came to a good understanding. At first my brother, who had a great dread of cant, did not fancy his cousin's strictness and zeal in his profession; but, as soon as he discovered how perfectly genuine he was in every respect, and how little he thought of himself or anything he did, and how firmly determined he was to do his duty to the uttermost, then he yielded him his unqualified respect, and personal regard succeeded on further acquaintance, soon strengthened by the pleasant ties of family friendship.

I believe the Honourable Mrs. Jones was very happy in her new position at Thorpe, especially when it was seen that the new Squire Markham and his wife, at the Manor-house, always called at her house when they drove into Thorpe.

She had been determined to establish herself as a sort of queen there, and by dint of skilful management she succeeded ; and when it was found she had not lost caste with her former husband's family, then the most aristocratic of her neighbours ventured to visit the doctor's wife, and by degrees the little *ci-devant* doctor himself rose on his wife's pinions to the same elevation on which she had chosen to place herself.

I thought my step-mother much improved when I went to pass a few days with her that winter ; the active life she led agreed with her—both health and spirits, as well as temper, were much benefited thereby. Her husband looked upon her with great admiration ; the awe with which she had formerly inspired him had hap-

pily vanished under the familiar intercourse of daily domestic life ; and, strange as it may appear, the apparently ill-assorted pair appeared to live very comfortably and amicably together. I believe they really liked each other, in their own peculiar way.

It happened one day, in the early spring-time of that same year, I drove over to Thorpe on a shopping expedition. My two little twin nieces were my companions, Cissy and Annie being always my especial pets and charges ; the boy Raymond, who was younger and a delicate child, hardly ever left his mother's side. She had lost her eldest, as well as a baby-boy, just before Piers settled to come to England ; so this remaining darling was tended with peculiar care. Dr. Jones's house was always our first point of destination on those occasions ; we were sure of a welcome and a luncheon. I therefore drove straight to the house, and, dismissing the carriage, took my little nieces with me into the house without ceremony.

The sitting-room was empty, but I saw the

doctor through the open door in the garden busily employed, as he loved to be, amongst his plants and flowers. He gave us all three a kindly nod of welcome, saying his hands were not fit to offer us; and then, in answer to my question respecting my step-mother, said—"Yes, the dear lady" (he always called her either "*the dear*" or "*my* dear lady," but very seldom either "*Mrs. Jones*," or "*my wife*," and never "*Charlotte*," either to herself or others)—"yes, she is gone out for a drive, and to lunch at Sir James Stirling's. Lady Stirling was here the other day; she brought her children on their way to the dentist's, and begged the dear lady to go there any day this week (next week the Stirlings are going to London); so I pressed her to go there this morning, not knowing you and the dear little children were coming. But I am glad she went; I hope it will do her good; and she will be back before you have done your shopping, for you must have your luncheon and the children their dinner before you set off on that business."

The two little girls, who were lively, restless little creatures, began about that time to clamour for a sight of “dear lady’s” (as they called her, in imitation of the doctor) talking parrot, her Persian cat, her dancing poodle, and various other accomplished pets, the possession of which had greatly endeared “dear lady” to her step-son’s little daughters. After the children had been duly disposed of to the care of Mrs. Jones’s own maid, whilst their dinner was preparing, I sat down in the garden to talk to the doctor, whilst he continued his labours on the flower-bed close by.

“This,” said he, indicating a special parterre, “this is my principal charge in the garden, and it is to be filled with the sweetest and choicest of flowers, for it is just under my dear lady’s own room window.”

“She is quite well, I hope, for you spoke of the drive doing her good?” I asked by way of beginning our conversation.

“Pretty well, pretty well—just a little want of power in the pulse, and slight nervous affec-

tion of spirits ; so I can't let her sit at home and think to-day ?”

“ To-day ?”

“ Ah, my dear Miss Marian—have you forgotten ? Why, don't you remember ?—it is your brother Claude's birthday.”

“ Ah ! so it is ; and his poor mother still frets over it.”

“ Yes ; and so she will do till he comes back to her.”

“ Poor dear Claude, he seems quite to have forgotten us all. How I wonder where he and Flora are !”

“ No one can tell for certain ; and yet a curious little coincidence occurred to me the day before yesterday.”

“ You don't mean relating to Claude ?”

“ Only this,” said Mr. Jones, laying down his hoe, and coming up to me, whilst he spoke earnestly and rapidly, “ it seems a mere trifle, but you know I went to York on business the other day, and having to stop an hour at the branch station, went to the book-stall, to get

something to read whilst we stopped there, for I had forgotten to take my morning paper. It was a small place, and a very poor collection of books, and none of the titles were familiar to me; so, as the next best guide, I looked at the names of the publishers, and here" (pulling a small book out of his pocket) "the first I looked at was this American pamphlet, published at New York by 'Masters and *Markham*.' Now, is not that strange?"

I felt much disappointed, as I observed ours was not an uncommon name, and we had no reason whatever to infer that it could in this case belong in any way to Claude.

"Well, well," said he, returning the book to his pocket, rather vexed at the slighting view I took of his discovery, "you may think nothing of it, Miss Marian, but for all that I have seen in my experience things turn up very strangely when you least expect them; and when they do, to my mind it is because they are intended to do so—the time is come for them; for I have no faith in blind chances myself."

"No more have I. I only wish I could believe there was the slightest clue in this publication. My own impression is, and so is his sister Juliet's, that he and his wife are living abroad under a feigned name—(and you are aware she saw Flora)—at least, I cannot help hoping it is so."

The little doctor stood leaning on his hoe, and slowly turning the leaves of the little book in his hand, as if to desire some counsel or comfort from so doing. At last he said,

"I have tried the advertising plan."

"No, have you? With no effect, I fear."

"None as yet. I put several advertisements in the *Times* column, after my dear lady and I were first married, for I wished to give her all the joy I could think of; so I worded it thus—'*If C—de M—k—m, who left his home (date), will return with his wife to his disconsolate family, all will be forgiven, and arrangements made to his advantage.*' Nothing could speak clearer or fairer than that."

"Nothing!" I replied with a sigh, as I

thought if Claude were *willing* to return, there would be no occasion to advertise to induce him to do so.

On my return home that day, I mentioned the little occurrence I have just narrated, as a specimen of the little Doctor's kindly spirit, but not as thinking it of the least importance. Piers, however, took it up quite warmly, saying it *might* be a clue, and we were bound to follow up any, even the most remote that might present itself, observing, at the same time,

"I have been thinking a good deal about that poor lad lately; it does seem such a thing to sit down quietly to enjoy ourselves here, and never concern ourselves about him in any way, but leave him coolly to his fate, whatever that may be—poor Claude! What a fine handsome boy he was when I left home; and so good-tempered, nothing could spoil him, though his mother tried hard. I must hear something of him, and should have done so before, only I did not know which way to turn, and I have been so busy here ever since I came home. But I

won't be idle in Claude's affairs any longer; slight as this idea is, I will follow it up." Then after a pause he asked, " You told me he was engaged by your neighbour, Mr. Crofton, as his secretary in helping him in his literary pursuits; now can you—but I fear it is useless asking you, Marion—tell me anything as to their nature, or method of publication, or any names of those he employed, or was associated with in these pursuits?"

These questions and ideas of Piers seemed to let in a flood of light into my mind, as suggestive of the nature of the occupation Claude might have sought, and those to whom he might have applied as likely to aid him in his endeavours to earn a livelihood; and in so thinking a little hope began to dawn upon the Doctor's discovery. How thankful was I to be able to furnish so many particulars of the nature Piers desired to ascertain, and yet had so little expectation of being able to acquire. My brother looked at me, with a comical expression of astonishment on his dark pleasant face, and then said,

"Why, you seem, Marion, to have been as much *au fait* at this Mr. Crofton's literary proceedings as Claude himself could have been. I had no idea you took so much interest in those subjects; you have completely hid your candle under a bushel hitherto."

"I fear you will find it is a very poor reflected little light after all, and not in the least capable of giving any light by itself; but you know Juliet and I were so much and so constantly at the Hall with the Croftons, before Mary married and all this unhappy business occurred, that it is no wonder we were interested in all that was going on there."

Piers mused for a few minutes, and then asked some farther questions respecting the intimacy that had existed between the two families (for Mr. Crofton came to the Hall after my brother had left his home), but I saw he never for a moment approached the truth of the real nature of the interest which had sprung up between me and my former friend. He was evidently misled by the relationship of father and daughter, and thought only of Flora as a friend

both of Juliet's and mine ; he had no idea that her father was scarcely older than himself. He spoke, however, very sternly in regard to Mr. Crofton's conduct as a father, and the implacability he had shown towards his daughter and poor Claude, saying—"Though I do not for a moment defend the conduct of either in this unhappy affair, yet I most utterly and entirely condemn the part Mr. Crofton has taken, and the spirit he has shown in the whole business."

"Poor man!" said I, incautiously advocating his cause, "he had before suffered so terribly, that, when his trust was again betrayed, we can hardly wonder at his feeling it so bitterly and resentfully."

"Is that *you*, Marian?" asked Piers, looking up at me in surprise. "I should have expected you to have advocated the young people's cause, instead of taking part with the stern old father."

Stern old father!—the epithet made me almost smile in the midst of my distress and perplexity; but I hastened to say,

"And so I do, Piers. I am desirous of making every excuse for our dear Claude."

"And for his poor young wife too, I hope," said my brother, adding—"It does seem almost incredible to me that a man could have the heart to cast off his only child on such a provocation, great as it might have been. Even if he had chosen to have kept her at a distance for a time, it is quite horrible to think of leaving them without any means whatever in the world, to sink or swim, as the chance might turn up. My only hope is that we may yet find that Claude has been at work to some advantage for their maintenance. Well, we will find them out, I am determined, now I have taken the matter in hand, if they are to be found in any quarter of the globe."

Such was my brother's firm resolve, and I knew that, having once formed his project, he would not be deterred from it. His wife (his ever-valued counsellor on all occasions) advised him to go up to London at once, and begin prosecuting his inquiries after his brother there.

We were all aware it was the first place he and Flora went to on leaving home. How I loved Pamela for her unselfish conduct on the occasion!—for I knew any separation, however short, from that beloved husband was painful to her. But she urged his going at once, and as he said he could leave her happily under my care, he fixed an early day, saying no time was like the present. He employed the intervening time in making every inquiry, and noting down the least thing that could serve as a guide to him in his search.

The morning before Piers set off on his journey to London, Luke came in early, saying his visit was chiefly intended for me, as he had news to tell me which he was desirous to bring himself, though he was sorry to say it was very melancholy. Seeing we all looked alarmed—thinking, no doubt, of our missing brother—he hastened to say that it did not concern any of us immediately in regard to relationship, but he knew, for the sake of Lady Manwairing, I should be grieved to hear her husband was

dead. I felt, at the same time, a great shock and a great relief. For one moment I fancied it might be some calamity had befallen her brother, and yet, when I heard the real fact, most deeply did I sorrow for my friend. Her married life had indeed been a sad one, and yet so far it had fulfilled its purpose, that she had been able to watch over and smooth the last few years of her beloved husband's existence. Poor Mary!—and that was the end of her many prayers for his restoration, of all her tender and devoted care! Alas! there had indeed need be a brighter and a happier world than this, where the fairest fruit we gather is but like the dead sea apples in our mouth! Then, with the selfishness of human nature, as soon as I had quite realised the fact of my poor friend's bereavement, I began to speculate on the effect it might have on the family movements, and I turned to Luke for information on that point, asking him where he had heard these sad tidings, and if he knew anything relative to Mary herself. Luke told me he had his infor-

mation from the most authentic source—that was from old Mrs. Forest, whose son had heard the preceding day direct from Mr. Crofton, who wrote from the Cape.

“And what did he say?” I asked, my voice trembling, and my heart throbbing.

“I understood Mrs. Forest that Mr. Crofton was at that time himself on his way home, and is probably now arrived, bringing his widowed sister, with her baby boy and orphan step-daughter, and that the vessel they were in conveyed the remains of Sir Edward Manwairing, which they were bringing to be interred at his own family place.”

And, after all poor Mary’s hopes and expectations, *that* was her first visit to that charming place she had so often talked of, and longed to show me! Could anything be more deplorably sad than these tidings of my early friend? and yet, to my shame I record it, there was an undertone of gladness in my heart, which said—“*He* is coming back!—*he* is perhaps even now in the same locality as yourself. Who knows

but that *he* may come even to his own home again, and that you may see him once more ?” I did not own to those thoughts at that time, and I was very sincerely distressed for poor Mary. What a blighted life hers had been, and yet how full of devotion to others ! Surely now, thought I, something will be heard of Flora ! When Mary has time and thoughts to bestow on anyone, she will never rest till she has found the lost lamb, and brought it home rejoicing to her motherly care.

Piers sat some time that evening in thought. At last he looked up and said to Luke, who, with his wife, was dining at the Manor,

“ I wish you would come with me to London to-morrow, Dillon. I should like to see that Mr. Crofton, if possible, and he is in town ; so will you come ? ”

So Luke said “ Yes,” and they set off together the next day.

CHAPTER XV.

JULIET remained at the Manor-house, where it was settled she was to take up her abode during the few days of her husband's absence. Piers intended to return as soon as he had seen things put a little into train, and had been able if possible to accomplish an interview with Mr. Crofton, who, John Forest believed, intended to come up to London as soon as the funeral was over. But said he could not fail to hear of him from his agent there, with whose address Forest furnished his clergyman, as a proof of his special favour.

We three women, then, stood looking after Piers and Luke as they departed, glad to see them go on their errand of mercy, and longing intensely to see them return with happy tidings,

as we trusted, of the long lost and absent. Two or three days passed quietly away. We did not expect much news at first. Of course both the wives received treasured lines of affection, as soon as their husbands reached their destination, and I was fain to be content with the scraps they treated me to, and kind messages contained in their letters. The "dear lady" and her husband came over to see us, and hear what had taken the two gentlemen away so suddenly, as she—Mrs. Jones—had never heard a word of their intentions till Miss Jones brought the news that they were actually gone. As Piers had particularly desired that nothing should be said relative to the object of his journey, no one could satisfy either the doctor or his lady as to the cause of this unexpected movement.

"I don't think anything about *your* husband running about now and then to amuse himself," said Mrs. Jones to Pamela; "but really" (turning to Juliet) "I *am* surprised when your quiet stay-at-home parsons *frisk* off in this manner. Well, as he is gone, and is not coming back

just yet, you had better come and see me, and bring the child too, if you like."

Juliet was, however, far better pleased to remain with little Alice where she was; and Pamela, guessing the same, put in her urgent claim to the visit she had been promised in her husband's absence, so that there was nothing more to be said, though Mrs. Jones drew up rather haughtily, something in her old way, as she begged her daughter not to distress herself to make apologies which were not needed. Juliet made the *amende honorable* as far as she was able, by saying,

"I really expect Luke back in two days at furthest, mamma; but I shall be very glad to come to you some other time, and just now, whilst he is away, I am glad to find myself in the midst of my parish, as I am here, and at Thorpe I should be quite out of the way."

"Well, you are all very mysterious, that is all I can say!" said her mother in reply, with a searching and rather defiant look all round, which appeared to me to indicate that she had

some undefined fears and suspicions as regarded her son, but feared to give them utterance. Poor woman, her unusual irritability showed there was something more than usual stirring in her heart. I was a good deal perplexed, too, when, as they were leaving the room at the end of their unsatisfactory visit, the little doctor drew back, and said to me, in an audible whisper,

“ What about that little book, and the name, eh? I suppose you mentioned it to your brother? But, I say, *mum’s* the word as far as my dear lady is concerned just now. She would fret herself to fiddle-strings if she got hold of it in any way. You understand? Hush! Yes, yes, coming this instant, dear lady; don’t wait for me.”

But dear lady was not to be so put off, and she flounced back impetuously, saying,

“ What, more whispering and secrets! It’s *you* this time, Marian! What *can* you have got to say to the doctor that I am not to hear?” And then, muttering and complaining, the dear lady was led down to her carriage, where, no

doubt, her attentive husband soon managed to soothe and satisfy her.

The next morning Pamela received a large dispatch from Piers. I looked at it with envious eyes, thinking it must contain some tidings of an interesting nature, and so sat speculating rather rudely, I fear, on Pamela's sweet face, as she read her letter at the breakfast table. Of course the intensity of my gaze drew hers in a mesmeric way upon me in my turn. She laughed good-naturedly as she encountered my fixed, eager look.

"Yes, your instinct tells you true, Marian, there is a great deal about you in this letter, and you shall hear it all presently; at the same time glancing towards Juliet, who was too much absorbed in her own letter to care about that of any other person just then.

"About me," I said, disappointed; "I hoped it was about our dear Claude."

"Well," returned Pamela, "you shall hear—but perhaps you can guess—it is about some one Piers has just seen in London, who *will* ask after and talk about you."

What! thought I to myself, is it possible that Piers and Mr. Crofton have actually met, and even talked of me. What unutterably blissful visions followed that supposition ; but I dared not speak a word.

“ Ah ! I see you look guilty now. May Piers ask him down here ? Not just now, for many reasons ; but say some time in the summer, or autumn even ; though he says he would not annoy you by coming for the world, much as he desires to see you again. Dear Piers, he has found time to write all this to me, because he knows how pleased I shall be ; and I want you, Marian darling, too, to be glad to see Percival Digby here. He is the very person, I know, and so does Piers, to make you happy.”

Alas ! the charm was dissolved, and my disappointment was so bitter, I could only just articulate,

“ Oh ! no, that could never be, for I can’t love him !”

I saw Pamela was hurt at my perversity, as she imagined it ; and perhaps it was natural, as

she could not tell the cause, and believed I might have liked Mr. Digby had I chosen to do so. Perhaps, considering my entirely dependant situation, some people might have considered it my duty to have made the endeavour, when so advantageous an opportunity of marrying offered itself again to me. But I was quite sure that consideration had no weight with my open-hearted, generous-minded sister-in-law. It was of me she thought, and my advantage; and she also had a very sincere regard for her husband's friend, and desired, above everything, to see us united. However, she soon regained her equanimity (sooner than I did mine) and no more was said on the subject at that time.

Luke did not return as soon as we expected him—he got a friend to take his duty for him for two or three Sundays, and then he and Piers came back together. Neither of them had entered into any details as to the success of their proceedings in their letters home, so we had everything to learn on their return. It may be imagined how eagerly Juliet and I

scanned the countenances of both the men, when we saw them once more ; whilst Pamela was little less anxious to hear that some good had resulted from their long separation—for so it seemed to her. It struck me immediately that neither Luke nor Piers looked as if they were satisfied with what they had accomplished, or possibly with the failure that had attended their efforts. I was too anxious to hear, to dare to question, so waited patiently till Piers could tell me all about everything.

“ *I fear,*” said he, “ there is nothing very comforting to record ; and we are still quite in the dark as to Claude’s present locale ; but our good friend, the doctor, did us good service in pointing out the first steps we were to pursue ; and we hope in time we shall hear more—every-thing is in train to do so. But there was no use in waiting any longer in London, so we thought it best to come home ourselves after we had set things going, and left them in abler hands than our own, and had had the desired interview with Mr. Crofton.”

"Then you have actually seen Mr. Crofton ?
When was that ? You never mentioned it."

"No, for it only took place two days ago.
That was what detained us so long. He was
not in town when we first went up. He waited
with his sister, Lady Manwairing, at her place,
somewhere in Kent or Sussex, I think, till she
came up with him, which she was obliged to do
on her late husband's affairs."

"Poor Mary ! You did not see her, I sup-
pose ?"

"No. Being an entire stranger to *her*, I
could not expect to do so at that time, but she
saw Dillon."

And then Piers gave me the full account of
their proceedings, and what information they
obtained, which may be briefly thus recounted :
Piers, with Luke, made their first application
for tidings of Claude to the various members of
the literary firms with whom Mr. Crofton had
transacted business, and with many of whom
Claude had been in the habit of corresponding
in his own name, as his secretary. Piers said

they were quite elated to find their first cast so successful. It seemed poor Claude had made application in that direction almost immediately on his arriving in London with Flora. He desired, he said, to obtain a situation either as private secretary or amanuensis to some gentleman requiring such an assistant.

It did not appear that Claude's inquiries had met with any success from those to whom he first addressed himself. It seemed that the rumour of his elopement, with the reason of his quitting Mr. Crofton, had got wind, and people looked coldly upon him in consequence. From certain inquiries Piers was enabled to make, he gathered that Claude had at last got some temporary employment to illustrate a weekly paper of no great importance, and to supply a few articles in the same. Then it was that a young man of some importance, who was attached to a leading literary house, and had seen Claude (whom he had previously known by correspondence) when making his fruitless application at the same house, and liking what he

saw of him, found him out, and introduced him on his own responsibility to connections of his own, who took him up, and promised to do the best in their power for him.

The opportunity offered itself soon after in the shape of a clever American publisher, who happened to come over on matters connected with their house of business, and seeing Claude, took a fancy to him, and proposed that he should go back to America with him, and at the same time offered him a situation connected with his literary staff on liberal terms. These were, it may be supposed, readily accepted by Claude; and that he got on well, and that his employer was well satisfied, was made sufficiently apparent by the fact that in the course of a couple of years from that time the name of Markham appeared in conjunction with that of Marshall. Thus it seemed Claude's rise and progress in the working world of literature had been steady, and no doubt remunerative. But, unhappily, his prosperity seemed then to have come to its culminating point, and the star of his good fortune

set—at least in that hemisphere—as far as could be guessed. Mr. Marshal died suddenly. What property he had devolved on a nephew, as heir-at-law, for he had made no will. Claude Markham had no legal instrument to show his claims on a share of his partner's property. The nephew seized on everything he could claim, and Claude Markham was turned adrift. It was believed that what little money he had individually saved he embarked at once in a trading vessel; but that was all uncertain. It was nearly two years since anything had been heard of him in New York; but it was hoped there was a chance of fuller information before long. It seemed he was well known by name and appearance during the two or three years he lived with Mr. Marshall in New York. He affected no mystery, and if anyone had taken the trouble to inquire, he might have been heard of before. But, alas! there was a great gap between that time and the present.

“ Possibly,” I suggested, “ it was then that Claude came with Flora abroad, and might have

taken the name of Delacour, for some reason or object, of which we could not possibly judge."

Then it was that Piers' honest face clouded over, and he said in a low but impressive voice,

"That is the strange part of his story; everyone is agreed that Claude Markham had *no wife!*—he came as a single man to America, and lived there single and alone! Yes! no doubt you are astonished, and so am I, but I can tell you nothing on the subject, for no one has ever solved the mystery to me!"

I cannot express the strange variety of feelings that quite overcame me at that revelation, it seemed too strange to be true; and yet that it was so, admitted of no doubt. But it would be wearisome to record half the extraordinary notions that flitted through my brain, without finding a place to rest in, during the course of that and many succeeding days. Piers then said, when he and Luke Dillon had fully ascertained that extraordinary fact, which cast such an entirely new light over every part of the subject, together with what he and Juliet

had seen and heard when in Switzerland of Flora and her companion, they came to the instant conclusion that Mr. Crofton ought without loss of time to be informed of this new position of affairs. There was so much that was contradictory, and everything that was perplexing, in the whole proceeding regarding that strange elopement (which had undoubtedly taken place), that unless one, or both of the missing parties could be found, and their own statements taken, there was little or no chance of ever arriving at any conclusive opinion on the subject.

"So that is just the position of affairs at this present time," said Piers wearily. "I will not say we have not done some good; but I confess, whichever way I turn in this labyrinth of perplexities, I see fresh difficulties in getting out of them."

I asked anxiously respecting Piers's introduction to Mr. Crofton, and he said he found him courteous and gentlemanlike, but evidently shrinking from the subject that had brought

them together, and altogether disinclined to believe that Claude Markham had gone to America alone. He had no doubt, he said, that people fully believed that it was so; but he could see no object in my brother's leaving his "wife" behind him. That he was sorry to be obliged to say it, but he believed both the young people were able dissemblers, and if they wished to conceal the fact of their marriage in America they would contrive to do so.

"I cannot say," added Piers, "that my interview with Mr. Crofton was satisfactory; it was next to impossible to deal with a man who seems to doubt every person he comes in contact with, and reconciles every apparent impossibility in his own mind by supposing it the result of some extraordinary piece of duplicity on the part of others. Still, he listened with forbearance to my openly-expressed opinion to the contrary of all he believed, and even tolerated me when I spoke of the duties which fathers owed even to their erring children—daughters especially. By the way, Marion,

what a young-looking man he is! to have a daughter who has made all this *esclandre* some five or six years ago!—and so good-looking too. I saw, however, I made no impression upon him, in spite of all my earnestness. Still, he gave me the idea of wishing to be friendly, and we parted on good terms, though by no means satisfactory to me. I believe, however, Dillon had far better success with your former friend Lady Manwairing."

It was some consolation after this, to turn to Luke and hear his account of his interview with poor Mary. I knew how much it must have cost her, a widow of only three or four months' standing, and she who was a *widow indeed*; for great, indeed, is the difference between "*widows and widows!*" But Mary Manwairing was one truly bereaved. Still, she came out of the absorbment of her overwhelming grief to see Luke, and hear his account of Juliet's interview with Flora, and every little particular he had gathered during the time he was in the neighbourhood.

"She was my first child, you know," she said, with a sorrowful smile, "and she has a right to my best motherly care, especially if all the world besides forsake her."

Then she promised Luke that she would use every endeavour to discover and trace her out, whilst Piers, on his part, was conducting his search for his brother in America. She—Lady Manwairing, would turn to the Continent, taking, as a clue, the name and date that Luke had given her. She would spare no expense, she said, in finding her niece, and bringing her back if living, to her safe protection, even if it should be found that she and her husband had unhappily, either from choice or necessity, separated. Luke told me she was very calm, and seemed very determined to prosecute her intentions—and spoke passingly of her satisfaction in having such abundant means at her command, that she fully anticipated success—though she feared there might be little satisfaction in the results.

Luke said she asked with affection after me and Juliet, and seemed on the whole glad to

have seen anyone so nearly connected. She showed Luke her own boy, a fine child about three years old, the little Sir Everard Manwairing and his half-sister, a sweet little girl about ten years old, both left to her sole and undivided care and guardianship. She seemed deeply impressed with the sacred importance of the charge in both cases; but simple and natural in her expression of her feeling in that and every other respect, as she had ever been.

She did not give an opinion as to the strange discrepancies in the present position of our family affairs, nor attempt to solve the difficulties of them by anything of her own suggestion. She said everything was so perfectly inexplicable and unaccountable, and yet she would try to hope the best. She said she blamed herself for not having taken a more active part towards her niece when she first left her home with Claude. But she confessed to having felt so bitterly grieved and disappointed at the disgraceful and dishonourable conduct of the two young people, that she felt with her brother it would be

as well to leave them to their own devices for a time.

She never doubted but that Flora would apply for pardon and assistance, as soon as she felt either necessary to her well-being; and though Mr. Crofton had declared that under no circumstances he would be persuaded to grant either, he so far conceded to his sister's urgent request, that he promised the application should be forwarded to her at any time, whenever the run-away couple saw fit to make any. None came, however; and soon after that time her whole thoughts and time were so occupied and engrossed with her husband's increasing weakness and illness, and her own cares and anxieties, with her own baby as well, that she left other things to take their own course; and of that she now repented, and was desirous to make all the reparation in her power.

No wonder, thought I, as I listened to Luke's recital of his interview with Mary, that she had no thoughts to spare for me then! No time to write! and yet she sent me a kind message to beg me to go and visit her that next summer.

CHAPTER XVI.

I NEED not linger long over this portion of my story—the sequel will soon be told. Alas ! for my brother's endeavours !—his agents failed to find out where Claude had vanished to, and whether he were still living in that great western world to which he had betaken himself. It was the more bitterly disappointing, because all the earlier part of his history stood out so clear and so distinct ; but yet it was, as a solitary figure, that my young brother always appeared in every position in which he could be traced. Every one who had known him, had never thought of him otherwise than as a single man. Of the story which had preceded his arrival in New York, his friends and acquaintances there knew little and cared less. It was

supposed that after the death of his partner and patron, Mr. Marshall, he speculated in various ways with what little money he had. It was believed at one time he went into the backwoods, but no one had seen him or cared to inquire after him ; and it was so long since his disappearance, that in such a rapidly-moving population as that in the great city of New York, Claude Markham was speedily forgotten. It was such a common occurrence for a young man in his position to leave the place and try to push his fortunes elsewhere, that possibly no one ever asked where he went to, when he left his place empty.

Thus baffled and grieved at heart, Piers declared he could do no more, and that he had gone so far with so little let or hindrance, added, as I have said, to his disappointment and my sorrow. That Juliet fully participated in both may be readily imagined. We were only comforted in thinking that we had spared his mother any participation in our anxiety and consequent failure—she knew of neither.

The months had passed quickly away in our varied moods of suspense and hope (whilst the latter lasted), and summer was fully come, when the pursuit was given up as vain and unprofitable. All we could rest upon was, that if a chance of ascertaining his fate ever presented itself, instructions were in full force to follow them up and send immediate tidings of the same to Piers.

Thus we rested ; and about that time Lady Manwairing wrote to ask me to go and see her, according to the old promise made so many years ago. I went, glad of the opportunity of seeing her again, and glad also that I might be absent when Mr. Digby came to visit my brother ; or, that at all events my presence in his house should be no bar to their meeting. So I thankfully availed myself of Mary's seasonable invitation, and went to stay with her.

I will not record what busy thoughts often flitted across my mind as to whether, after so many years of separation, Mr. Crofton might wish to meet me again upon our old footing of

familiar friendship. I never dreamt of anything beyond that; or whether he would still avoid me for the offence of others, I could not decide. Sometimes I thought one thing, sometimes another. I found, however, after I had been some little time with Lady Manwairing, that her brother's society was not destined to form any part of my enjoyment at her house—he never came, and I soon ceased to expect he would. It seemed, his determination once formed, was not to be shaken or broken through.

I need not dwell with any detail upon the quiet days I passed with my old friend. There was pain, no doubt, as well as pleasure in the recollections of the past, that we recalled together; but I was altogether very happy with Mary and her children. I enjoyed those long quiet days, rambling about that beautiful old place, and living a dreamy sort of summer existence in the lovely gardens and grounds beneath those shady, wide-spreading trees, where most of our time was spent.

I soon found that Lady Manwairing's thoughts were earnestly engaged in the prosecution of the search she was still carrying on, for the discovery of her missing niece and her husband (as she hoped). Having once embarked in the undertaking, she carried it on with a vigour and promptitude that promised well for its eventual success. She had been frequently disappointed, but never actually foiled or turned from her intentions; and at last she told me she had received accounts which gave her every reason to hope that the very next which might be brought to her would bring decided tidings of Flora and her husband. In fact, she said, she felt so hopefully sure, that she had addressed a letter of affectionate entreaty to her niece, beseeching her to cast aside her mysterious reserve, and whatever might be her reasons for so long observing such concealment, and assuring her that under any circumstances she would find a friend in her Aunt Mary.

"If Flora has any heart or feeling remaining," I observed, "I think she must respond to such an appeal."

"I think she will," said her aunt quietly. Then after a pause I asked, in reference to that part of her announcement, which was most interesting to me,

"And have you heard anything respecting her husband, or is she alone?"

"She is *not* alone, and the description I have received gives me every reason to believe that you will get tidings of Claude at the same time, also, as I shall of Flora."

There was great comfort to me in that supposition, and I thought it accounted for all trace of Claude having disappeared in the locality in which Piers had sought for him during the last two or three years; and it also proved that Juliet's sisterly instinct (if that was the case) had not been at fault as Luke supposed, when she thought she recognised Claude in Switzerland the year they went there.

Not many days after this had passed between Lady Manwairing and me, she came to me in haste one morning early, with her sweet face half tears and half smiles, and placed a large packet in my hand, saying,

"Read it, Marian—read it carefully and attentively by yourself, and then come and tell me all and everything you think about it."

The long letter she placed in my hands, and which I read with devouring, breathless eagerness, was as follows—it was signed "Florence D'Alembert"—it began :—

" You have prevailed, best of friends—dearest of aunts. I cannot withstand your affectionate entreaties. In a few months hence it was my intention to have told you all I am now prepared to do, as well as the reasons why I have so long delayed the communication. Besides, 'Hypolite' says I ought no longer to defer my news, and 'Hypolite' is always right. You will then surely ask me who is this 'Hypolite' who is always right? I answer with pride and joy, he is my husband, and my dearly loved. He is the Duc D'Alembert, and we have been married these three years—yes, privately, it is true, but as surely and safely as the two churches can make our union. I see your astonishment, and I hasten to satisfy it. I will

tell you all, dear Aunt Mary, you desire at my hands, at whatever cost it may be to my womanly pride. Listen, then. You will ask, where is Claude Markham ? I answer, at this moment—I do not know ; but I shall soon be able to tell you. You have long thought, and so has the world in general, that Claude Markham is my husband. I will not hide from you, Aunt Mary, there was a time when I earnestly desired it, for I loved Claude Markham. We were thrown so much together in the quiet intimacy of domestic life, that can you wonder I learnt to love a person so calculated to win any girl's heart ? Did you never suspect it in those days when we were together, Aunt Mary ?

“ Well, it matters little now to go back to those happy days, except to excuse what else might seem so wrong in me. I know that both you and my father were satisfied to believe my heart was given to Lord Ramsay, and could therefore be in no danger elsewhere. It is true, in our early acquaintance with Lord Ramsay—child almost as I was at the time—I was flat-

tered and attracted by the attention he showed me, and was not insensible to the prestige of his position, and the place he occupied in the estimation of others (especially my father) as a man of undoubted talent and amiable character. I hardly knew how well I really loved my father's secretary, young, handsome, charming as he appeared to me in every way. I was too great a novice in heart affairs to believe that I had given him mine as entirely as I had. I will not dwell on that point now, but only assure you he never intentionally showed me the slightest proof of love on his part. I was sometimes piqued at that, and, coquette as I was, tried to win some sign from him of answering affection and admiration. Sometimes I fancied I had succeeded in rousing a corresponding feeling on his part, and believed that, but for our peculiar positions, he would have loved me even as I desired.

"All this I kept to myself, to no one did I ever breathe the lightest word of my passion for Claude Markham, but all related to him became

dear to me on his account. I sought Juliet Markham more for his sake than any particular love I had for herself or her society. As time went on the conflict became harder. Lord Ramsay did not come forward, and my whole heart turned to Claude Markham. My health and spirits began to fail, but none—not even you, my beloved and watchful aunt—knew the cause. Sometimes I fancied I did not suffer alone; and then a wild joy took possession of every feeling of my heart. But it could not go on so. My father and you thought I wanted change of air, variety of scene, &c., and so it was resolved to take me abroad. I hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry, but I felt it was all for the best. I wanted to get rid of myself, and, if possible, of my unrequited love for Claude Markham. I need not recapitulate after events very particularly. I believed myself cured, and on meeting Lord Ramsay again, encouraged his addresses, and came home engaged to him. I did not sin deliberately then, in encouraging my former love. I hoped it was all at an end, and

safe in my new position, thought I might see Claude with impunity.

“I will not dwell on the fruitless struggles I made at that time, or the inward misery I endured, whilst all without was so smiling and so smooth. It was not till after our return home after your marriage, dearest aunt, that I realized all the horror of my situation. To please me, and to give me a companion of my own age, I suppose, my father then had Juliet Markham as my constant visitor at the Hall, whilst Lord Ramsay was absent; we were therefore a small party thrown entirely together—at least we three young ones were constantly so. What the result was, to my peace of mind I dare not dwell upon. I wish to be as brief on these matters as is compatible with the explanation you require. Still no intention of breaking my bonds ever occurred to me. I continued to look forward to my marriage as a thing that *must be*—it was an inevitable fate to me, for I had no pretence for breaking it off, and of Claude’s feelings I had no assurance. He seemed ever

to have the tenderest regard, even respect for me as my father's child; but as to my own individual self, he was sometimes so cold and distant in manner, that no wonder I doubted.

"Things went on till my father went up to London to fetch the bridegroom down, and I was called upon to name the day of my espousals. Then came the visit to the Eltons—that great turning-point in the story of my life. I was staying there some days during my father's absence, and Claude was also asked. He, however, availed himself but sparingly of those invitations; the one he accepted was to a dance in honour of Carrie Elton's birthday, the other to dine there the following day—he therefore remained the intervening night. On that night the fire occurred of which you have doubtless heard. Had it not been for that, things would doubtless have gone on, and my misery have been sealed long ere this. It was that fire that burst my bonds asunder and set me free. Not indeed in the way that I wished and intended, but quite as effectually, nevertheless. The brief

story of the event is this—that Claude Markham being first in all the risk of extinguishing the flames, and eager in rescuing all who were in danger, was the person who conveyed me in a half-fainting state from the stifling smoke with which my own room was filled. In all the bustle and hurry we were alone for a few seconds, and then, when he believed me insensible, the long, carefully-guarded secret of his heart was revealed. He loved me! Never shall I forget the wild joy of that moment; but it passed as instantaneously, for on my recovery I found him as distant—perhaps more so—than ever; he was evidently not aware that he had betrayed himself to me. But it was enough for me—nothing could undo the effect of that revelation. I saw, too, that Carrie Elton loved Claude, and that filled me with jealous dismay, for I expected, when I was once married, she would win him to return her affection. I was very calm all that next day, but I had come to a great resolution—nothing should induce me to marry Lord Ramsay. I began

then to be aware that I loathed the very thought of him. Claude loved me, and him only would I have. That day I waited for him in the hall, where I knew he must come in, for he had been absent all the morning ; and after everyone else was gone to dress, I remained below. He came as I expected, and I told him what I knew. It seems very bold, now I think of it, but I have promised to tell you all. We were both very calm as we talked of it, for too much was at stake to waste any time in profitless emotion. He then told me plainly he would rather die than take advantage of my regard, and he implored me to forget his folly and presumption, as he called it, for which he could never forgive himself, he said ; but he had never dreamt that I was conscious when he let those few tell-tale words escape him. He did not deny them, though I knew he would willingly have hid them for ever in his heart ; but he talked so nobly, and yet so tenderly, that I cried as I listened to him, and yet I felt happier than I had ever done before. I remem-

ber Miss Clifford coming through the hall dressed for dinner, and that she cast a sort of wondering look at us both. So I made an effort, and spoke to her, and then got up and left the room. I saw but little of Claude that evening, for I was not equal to the dinner, but came downstairs afterwards. He did not talk much to me, but behaved in a manner to avoid any appearance of studied neglect—in fact, he was everything that was right and conscientious on the occasion. I was neither mortified nor yet satisfied.

“That night I formed my own plans, which resulted in all that has since occurred. I found, from a few words Claude addressed to me, that he had determined to leave the Hall the next day, to see my father in London, and not to return whilst I remained there. It was all he could do, poor fellow, and he left the future to be decided by my father. He would return after my marriage, if he wished it. As I have said, *that* marriage I had decided should never take place.

“In the agitation of my spirits, and the great emergency of my position in regard to this impending marriage, I hastily resolved to leave my home also the same night, follow Claude to the railway-station that same evening, and offer him my hand, knowing how well he loved me, and then and there forsake everything for his sake. I can guess what your thoughts must be as you read this. But I tell you all. My plan was easily accomplished; I said I was going to return a day sooner than intended, and should meet my father at the station, and accompany him home from thence.

“As Claude had left the Deanery the day before, and was to arrive at the station by another road, no surprise was excited; and as it was late on a November evening, no one recognised me at the station, closely veiled as I was then. I did not give myself time to think, but took my ticket for London, and waited quietly in a dark corner of the room till it was time to start. There were not many passengers at that hour, but I saw with a beating heart that

Claude Markham was one. I watched him enter an empty carriage, and got in also. It was not till after we had gone some distance (it was an express train) that I let him know the name of the silent, muffled-up figure that was the companion of his journey.

“Over that interview, and the conversation that ensued, you must permit me to draw a veil. I can only say it was the most bitterly painful and humiliating hour I ever passed in my life, considerately and generously as he acted towards me. Nevertheless Claude Markham distinctly and decidedly rejected my proposition. It was the greatest relief to me, and I believe to him also, when we stopped at last at a station, and he was able to leave the carriage, and I had other companions for the rest of the journey. We arrived at an early hour in London, when I felt frightened at my solitary position, and yet too miserable to care much what became of me. Claude watched over me, however, and put me into a cab, and asked me whether I would go at once to the hotel where

my father was ; but that proposition threw me into such an agony of terror, that he only begged me to name some friend and some place where he should direct the man to drive to meanwhile.

“I had already resolved where, and to whom I would go, and that was to Celestine. Do you remember Celestine ? She was my poor mother’s maid, who accompanied her when she left her home, and remained with her till she died. She loved me dearly for her sake, though she had never seen me since I was seven years old, till we made that journey to London, when your marriage took place. Celestine often came to see me at the hotel, and I was charmed with her ; but we kept our meetings secret because papa hated her, and you would not have countenanced what he would have forbidden. Nevertheless, *I* knew she would stand my friend in that extremity—so to her I went. Claude Markham mounted the box and saw me safely to Celestine’s house. She had married well, and was then a widow in com-

fortable circumstances, with a pleasant house, in which she let apartments in the season. In her hands Claude left me, promising to call the next morning before his interview with my father; and trusting, he said, to find me inclined to send for him to fetch me himself from the place where I was.

“ That I never did return to him, you and all the world knows pretty well; but how poor Claude Markham became so entangled in my follies and misfortunes I must briefly relate.

“ When he appeared the next day he seemed so deeply touched with the condition he found me in, that he dared not urge a measure which I told him could only be carried out at the cost of my life. I had never been very strong, and I was so shaken with all I had gone through, that he saw I was in no state to bear an interview with my father, involving one perhaps with Lord Ramsay. So all I begged was, that he would for a few days observe the most perfect silence and secrecy in regard to my movements, as well as his own. I said it would kill

me if the report got about that I had run off after him, and he had refused to have me! Neither, said I, would it conduce to my father's real satisfaction to feel how low I had sunk; greatly as he (Claude) might rise in his opinion by the communication. That hint was enough; for devoted Claude Markham, with the most chivalrous and generous self-abnegation placed his reputation in my hands, whilst I promised it should only be for a few days that I asked that concession of him.

“I fell ill from agitation and disappointment, and faithful Celestine nursed me—and occasionally Claude called and inquired after me, but did not see me. At length he came and told Celestine he had found an opening for literary employment in America, and he then called to see me and say farewell. Again I entreated his forbearance and his silence in regard to me and my affairs, and also for a time as to his own. Whatever might have been his feelings on that subject, he seemed too full of compassion to deny anything I asked of him;

except that he should actually forfeit his integrity and make me his wife. Poor Claude ! how shamefully I have marred all his prospects hitherto ; but there is nothing now that he may not demand at our hands ! He went, glad, I believe, to leave England for a time, and then I was left with Celestine to get well if I could, or die, as seemed more likely at one time. I cannot tell you the intense fear I had of my father's discovering anything about my real history, and the place of abode. He had always been distant and rather cold with me, though ever kind in all essential matters. I knew, too, his extreme partiality for Lord Ramsay, and I shuddered as I coupled the two together !

“ Well, as I got better, Celestine, in her affectionate zeal for my benefit, one day named me to a lady who was then according to custom occupying the apartments in her house, with whom she had lived (before she married) after my poor mother’s death, and who was a former friend and acquaintance of hers. She was a foreign Comtesse, a Madame de Villeneuve, a

charming woman of a certain age, who had given up the world on the death of a husband she had adored some ten years before. She was alone in the world and had no child, and Celestine managed to bring about an acquaintance between us. It was a very happy occurrence for me, for no mother could have been kinder. She took me abroad with her, and it was during that time I became acquainted with her nephew, Hypolite D'Alembert. The first thing that attracted me to him was a sort of likeness to Claude Markham. He was much darker, but had the same cast of features, and the expression was similiar; and still more than that, as we became better acquainted I found other pleasant traits of likeness also in disposition.

“ To make a long story short, he became passionately attached to me, and I soon learnt to love him for his own sake, instead of his likeness to my good noble friend Claude. There were, however, great hindrances to our love affair. His old father was living, and he knew would never consent to his marriage with a

Protestant; besides which, Hypolite was betrothed to a young lady of equal rank, whom he had never seen, and who was finishing her education in a convent. To meet all these impediments, we could only have recourse to a private marriage, Madame de Villeneuve being in our confidence. The old Duc was very aged and infirm, and we felt it was the kindest thing to him, as well as ourselves, not to disturb his later days with the knowledge of our proceedings, and incur the consequences!

“Three years ago we were united; and then we had to entreat Claude’s silence for a season longer—any knowledge of the state of our affairs would have been utterly ruinous to us, so I confided *all* to him, and left my fate in his hands, assuring him it would be all right at last. He was to let Celestine hear once a year where he might be found, so that he would be sure to receive the tidings when the time came for revealing all, and breaking the silence he had so long and so magnanimously kept on my behalf.

“I can hardly tell you the consternation with

which I was seized, some two years ago, when that good Juliet Markham suddenly appeared on the scene as Mrs. Dillon ! I had to behave shamefully to her, to frighten her away, and we were obliged to flit in the night to avoid further discovery. But she must forgive me now, and I will introduce ‘le vrai Mari’ to her, and very charming he is—and she will think so !

“ The old Duc died six months ago, and we had not intended proclaiming our marriage till the expiration of a year—we thought it would be more respectful to his memory. And now I have said enough, dearest Aunt, in this brief sketch, which I will fill in with any details you may require when we meet, which I trust will be in a few days, as we are on our way to London. I am very happy as a wife ; my husband is very amiable, rich, *très grand seigneur*, and you will find him a very devoted nephew ; whilst I remain,

“ Your gratefully affectionate niece,

“ FLORENCE D'ALEMBERT.”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE astonishment with which I read the romance of Flora's strange story was only equalled by the indignation which possessed me when I thought of the shameful levity which had so unscrupulously sacrificed my brother Claude to serve her own selfish purposes of concealment. It was altogether unaccountable to me, the manner in which she had so worked upon his tenderness and generosity of nature, as to have induced him so completely to sacrifice himself for her pleasure and advantage, whilst he had conscientiously preserved his own honour and integrity. It would hardly bear thinking of. It made me feel so angry with Mr. Crofton's daughter, whilst at the same time I thought with a pang of remorse that a little

exertion on his part, and inquiry at the time of her disappearance, might have prevented all these subterfuges, and the necessity for my brother's self-sacrifice.

The all-important question was now—*Where* was he to be found? Flora said she could easily gain that intelligence, though she did not know herself. The observation she made regarding her own and her husband's exalted position, enabling them to reward (as it seemed they considered) Claude's generosity, made me doubly indignant; as if such utter self-abnegation, arising from the purest and loftiest sentiments, could be purchased and recompensed by anything they had to bestow!

I was intensely surprised to find that Lady Manwairing did not at all enter into my feelings —she evidently thought only of recovering her lost darling, and hardly bestowed a thought on my missing brother. She dwelt upon the ingenuousness of Flora's confession, in which she had not sought to excuse herself on the part she had played towards Claude. For my part, I

thought the young duchess altogether inexcusable, and had hardly patience to talk over the contents of her long letter with her too partial aunt. I begged Mary, however, to get me the desired tidings of my brother's whereabouts without loss of time, saying I would ask Piers to come up to London immediately, that he might take any steps that might be necessary for communicating with him. At the same time I proposed an early day of departure, saying I would meet him in town and return home when he left.

Lady Manwairing seeing my anxiety, made no opposition to my leaving her at the time I mentioned. She said she would also go to London at the same time, as she was desirous of meeting Flora and her husband at the earliest opportunity, and she should be glad to be of any use to me in facilitating the means of hearing of Claude.

By mutual consent we avoided much discussion on the subject that engrossed both our thoughts and feelings just then. I could not disguise my feelings as to Flora's conduct; and

Lady Manwairing was desirous of sinking all unpleasant recollections, and dwelling only on the prosperous termination of her darling's adventures. I wondered at it, for Mary had such a keen sense of right and wrong generally, and almost equalled her brother in her quick appreciation of character in all its lights and shades. But in this case it was very certain her judgment was blinded by her affection.

I was not sorry when the day came (which it did very quickly) for our journey to London, as Piers answered my letter immediately, appointing an early day for meeting me in London. On our arrival there Mary and I took a temporary leave of each other. She went to her own town house, and I to an hotel where my brother had appointed to meet me. I found him there on my arrival, all anxiety as to the farther tidings I had promised on seeing him. It was, of course, needful to tell the whole story, which I endeavoured to do, so as to spare Flora as much as possible. But I found Piers' sentiments very much in unison with my own: We

did not wish to trouble Lady Manwairing any more on the subject than was absolutely necessary, nor did we desire to have any communication with Flora on so delicate a subject. All that was needful to be said was conveyed in a little note from Mary to me, which said her nice and her husband were arrived, and were staying with her in her house; and Flora had referred us for any inquiries we wished to make to Madame Celestine, whose direction was enclosed. As Piers undertook all that part of the business, I had but little to do with my own time, and spent it in fruitless worry as to the chances of our ever seeing Claude again. Piers said he found the little French woman extremely amiable, and willing to afford all the information in her power; but, alas! she had none to give—at least, none that was of any use, for it was more than a year since she had received any tidings from *ce beau monsieur* his brother Claude. She produced the note she had received from him last; it only said any tidings would find him about that time at a certain direction

somewhere in the Mauritius, where he had gone as super-cargo with an American trading vessel. Since that he had never sent her a line, and I believe she did not scruple to express her apprehensions to Piers that that being the case, it was but too probable in the adventurous life he seemed to be leading, that the chances were against our ever hearing more of our poor Claude.

The poor woman seemed to be almost as anxious as ourselves for good news of our brother ; he had evidently created a strong interest in the little Frenchwoman's heart, and she quite worshipped him for the manner in which he had behaved to Flora—shielding her and her fame at the cost of his own good name, and sacrificing home and friends in her cause.

“Mais c'est magnifique !” she exclaimed to Piers, as she recited over and over again her own feelings on that memorable evening when they arrived at her house together ; and then she added, with tears, “and he behaved like a father to her when her own father cast her off !”

Piers seemed rather interested and amused by this Madame Celestine, who, he said, he believed from all inquiry to be a perfectly respectable sort of person in her way, and enthusiastically attached to the child of her former mistress, whom she regarded with quite a maternal affection ; but there was no doubt, Piers said, that on some subjects her ideas were far more French than English, and from this point of view she looked at all Flora's strange proceedings. Madame Celestine expressed the utmost joy and satisfaction that Flora's "*petit roman*" was now played out, and had come to a happy conclusion, and that no farther necessity existed for the concealment of the splendid marriage she had achieved ; whilst the only thing that remained to be desired was the means and opportunity of letting *ce cher Monsieur Claude* know that such was happily the case, and all occasion for a continuance of his generous silence at an end.

Piers could only act, in prosecuting his enquiries, upon the latest intelligence of Claude's

locality, as he had failed to send farther instructions at the appointed time. There were but two ways of accounting for this : one was, that he might still be found trading to and fro in the Mauritius ; the other, that his place might no longer be found on earth ! From the latter supposition I shrank with shuddering horror. We found, however, we could arrive at no definite conclusion either way, and Piers had only again to make his arrangements for future inquiries, trusting that time might bring us either the desired tidings, or it might be Claude himself who, if living, would too gladly embrace the earliest opportunity of throwing aside his compulsory reserve, and returning to his own family and friends. All being so far satisfactorily arranged, Piers declared himself ready and desirous of returning home, whilst I was equally glad to leave town and accompany him.

The long summer days in a London hotel were wearisome enough to me, who had so many hours to spend alone, whilst my brother

found plenty to occupy his time. The last evening came, and after dinner Piers went out. He wished to meet a friend who was just come from India, and told me not to expect him again before I saw him. We had dined rather early, and it was still light, about eight o'clock, when my brother left me.

The day had been very hot, and the evening breeze was refreshing as I sat with all the windows open on to the balcony, which ran the length of the room outside. It was a pleasant time for thinking, and as I sat in the cool dusk of the summer evening, my thoughts dwelt with many a lingering recollection on the happiness of my last visit to London—first as the Croftons' guest at their hotel, and then as Lady Percival's in her pleasant house in Curzon Street. I recognised in the air that came languidly through the open windows, a species of odour peculiar to that time and season in London. It combined the scent of mignonette, with the less fragrant perfume of a distant mews. But I confess I liked it, for it reminded me of

past happy evenings in London, when I had often noticed it.

Whilst I indulged in these dreamy and somewhat sorrowful recollections, the waiter came in, and said a gentleman had called to see Mr. Markham. My thoughts immediately reverted to the friend whom he had intended to see, and had that morning apprised of his locality by leaving a card upon him. I therefore only said it was unlucky Mr. Markham had just gone out, but I believed the gentleman would find him at his own hotel. The waiter departed with my message, and returned, bringing back a card, and saying the gentleman sent that, and would Miss Markham object to seeing him for a few minutes? I did object very much. However, as I did not wish to be uncivil to a friend of Piers', I could only say, "Certainly—show him in here."

Whilst the man went to execute my order, I turned to the window with the card, to refresh my memory with the name I had heard, but

had forgotten. To my surprise I read there—“Mr. Crofton;” and the next moment he was in the room. Having had no time to be nervous in prospect, and thanks to the evening which cast its shade, our meeting after such a long separation passed over very quietly, without much embarrassment. His appearance was altogether so sudden, and entirely unexpected, that I could hardly tell which feeling predominated, surprise or (it must be confessed) satisfaction. As far as I could judge by the waning light, Keene Crofton was unaltered in looks or in manner, for his usual cold, calm self-possession did not desert him on that occasion. He began, after a brief greeting, to say,

“I took the liberty of calling on Mr. Markham this evening, hearing he was to leave town tomorrow, and finding him not at home, thought you would let me speak to you for half an hour, if disengaged.”

I could of course only murmur that I was very happy to see him; but there was something altogether so chilling in his tone and

manner, that I suppose I betrayed my sense of it by a certain tremulousness of accent I could not control. His own voice softened in a moment, and so did his speech, and he said earnestly,

“ You must forgive me if I seem abrupt and perhaps unfeeling, but I have had much to annoy and distress me lately ; and as I am come to speak on these unpleasant subjects to you and your brother, the more dispassionately we talk of these things the better, in my opinion.”

I saw then that his distance and reserve were but assumed as a mask, behind which to hide the agitation of his heart. I observed I was sorry my brother Piers was not within, as he seemed to wish so particularly to see him ; but he would be returned no doubt within an hour or two, if it would be convenient to call again later. Mr. Crofton looked at me earnestly as I said that, as if he would ascertain whether it were a desire on my part to see what share I had in his visit that evening, or whether I just

meant what I said. Perhaps he detected there was a slight mingling of both. I certainly did wish to know whether he did seek to see me once more; and I also did wish to give him the opportunity of improving his slight acquaintance with my brother Piers. Mr. Crofton merely replied, without noticing the option I gave him of going away, he would tell me at once the immediate reason for his call that evening; and, if he had the opportunity, would be happy to repeat it to Mr. Markham himself.

He then seated himself on the opposite side of a little table that was close to me, and leaning his elbow upon it, and his head on his hand, he began to speak in a low, monotonous, but distinct tone, as if he had already conned his lesson, and was desirous of saying it, and having done with it. He spoke at once of his daughter, of her actual marriage, and the strange tale that was connected with it. Making no comment on any part, till he had fully recapitulated all I knew before, including poor Claude's involuntary share in Flora's wild flight and subsequent

conduct. He said he had come up to London only a few days previously, in consequence of a summons from his sister, who then made him fully acquainted with all these particulars. As he paused for a moment, I observed,

“I am glad that, at all events, you know now that Claude has never acted treacherously, either in will or deed, towards you.”

Mr. Crofton hid his face for a moment in his hand; then, looking up, said,

“No, poor boy, he has been grievously sinned against. Nor is it a very satisfactory consideration that it is *my* daughter who, failing to induce him to do as she wished, contrived for her own purposes of concealment so to entangle him in the meshes of her unscrupulous proceedings, that by far the larger share of the blame has hitherto rested on him, whilst she has now successfully carried out her own plans, and he is released, being no longer wanted!”

“Ah! I only wish we knew *where* he is, that he might return to us again.”

“You *will* know before long, I trust,” was all

the reply Mr. Crofton made, but given in a tone that showed me we had his full and ready sympathy on the occasion. "And then you will find," he continued, "that painful and adverse as all these circumstances have been, that, after all, Claude will be the gainer. I mean in character, in strength and firmness, in a thousand ways, that nothing but this hard knocking about the world could have brought about. You will find he will come out of the fire hardened, not in heart, because that is not in his nature, but in those essentials that stamp a man's character with all that is most desirable. But it was not of that I came to speak to you this evening; for, truth to say, I am hardly equal to the discussion of these matters. They are really too hard for me at present, or rather too humiliating. I think you are aware of what my sentiments must be, so you will excuse further revelation of them. I come to speak about a certain missing sum of money. You know what I allude to. This sum was some time ago refunded, strange to say in the original notes in which it was paid.

I have made inquiry through my sister concerning it, and have now been fully satisfied as to the manner both of its abstraction and of its repayment."

Mr. Crofton touched very lightly on the details, which were simply these : Claude, in the haste and hurry of his proceedings in leaving home, forgot and brought the money to London with him, instead of paying it into the bank as he ought, and intended to have done. When he discovered his omission he immediately made it into a packet, and afterwards wrote his explanatory letter, directing both separately to Mr. Crofton, but folding them in a paper together. This packet he took with him when visiting Flora, with a view of persuading her to return to her father, at the same time telling her of his own letter. As she seemed desirous of seeing what he had written, he left it and his packet in her hands, and she promised to deliver both to her father. On his subsequent visit she told him how impossible she found it to carry out his views, at the same time beseeching him not

to send his letter to her father, as it must implicate her to such a fearful extent with him. She then told Claude she had ventured to destroy his letter to her father, and had sent the parcel by a trustworthy hand. It seemed, however, she had *not* destroyed Claude's letter, but had preserved it even to that time, when she placed it in her Aunt Mary's hands, as a convincing proof of Claude's honesty and integrity of purpose. Which I must do Madame D'Alembert the justice to say she always faithfully upheld. This note Mr. Crofton now held in his hand, and tendered to me, saying it was only just and fair that his brother as well as I myself should see it.

In respect to the packet of notes, Flora gave it to Celestine, with instructions for their immediate delivery. It seems the woman fully intended doing as desired, but in the hurry and excitement of everything around her at the time, she mislaid the packet; but feeling sure it would turn up in a day or two, would not disturb Flora by telling her of its disappearance. It was not

till more than a year afterwards she found it on moving a chest of drawers, behind which it had fallen. She then laid it by, not liking to draw attention on herself by sending it, and fully intending to place it in Flora's hands when they next met. It was in consequence of Juliet's visit and remark as to missing money which made Flora write to her friend Celestine, and in due course of time the packet was restored to Mr. Forest, as has been recorded.

After all these details, Mr. Crofton sat on, waiting my brother's return, but he was late. Though we neither of us, I believe, thought the time long, I do not think we talked a great deal, though we had each much to say. At last Mr. Crofton got up, and said,

“ Well, I will wait no longer now ; I will hope to see Mr. Markham some future time.”

“ Oh, when will that be ?”

“ I cannot tell now, but give him Claude's letter to me, and tell him all the rest.”

“ Yes, and if he hears of poor Claude you would like to know.”

“ You need not ask that, but possibly I shall be the first to hear.”

“ Oh ! do you think so—and then—— ?”

“ And then, Marian,” (it was the first time he had called me by my name as in the old days)—“ and then you will forgive me, Marian.”

“ Forgive you !” I faltered out.

He replied, “ Yes, when I bring Claude back to you, you will forgive my doubts of his integrity, my past harshness to all.”

“ We have all been mistaken, like yourself,” was all my reply.

“ Thank you, Marian ; you were ever generous, but I will not take advantage of it.”

The next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WE went home the next day, and in spite of all the uncertainty that still hovered over the fate of my dearly loved Claude, I was happy. I could not help it; there was no barrier now between me and Keene Crofton—we must eventually be happy, and in the meantime I indulged in a little foretaste of that feeling. It suddenly occurred to me, as Piers and I journeyed home, that possibly my old friend, Mr. Digby, might still be in my brother's neighbourhood. I knew he had paid him a visit whilst I was at Lady Manwairing's, and I conjectured that during Piers' absence to meet me in London, he might have taken refuge at the Parsonage, whilst his host was away. I therefore put the question as to the chances of our meeting again. Piers

looked a little amused as I did so ; it was the first mention of Mr. Digby that had occurred between us since we had been together in London. It may easily be imagined how fully our thoughts and time had been occupied with other subjects, and the whole of that morning had been passed in discussing the purport of Mr. Crofton's visit the preceding evening, and in commenting on Claude's letter, so full of noble feeling, and so touching in its extreme simplicity. Still Piers knew but half of the sentiments which that visit had called forth. When I put the question regarding Mr. Digby—we had then just left the Thorpe Station, and were wending our way through the deep sandy lanes that led to our own old home—I saw Piers' start of amused surprise as I put the question, and his answer shewed how little he understood the feeling with which I put it.

“ So you are beginning to think of him at last, Marian ! I wish you had done so a little sooner.”

“ I have had more interesting things to think

about lately, Piers," I answered, forgetful of his feelings of friendship.

My brother answered with a little pettish sort of sound, which savoured more of contempt than comment, on what I had said; so I hastened to ask where Mr. Digby might be, and if I was likely to find him still in the neighbourhood.

"Well, Percy paid us a long visit, hoping, no doubt, that you might come back whilst he was with us, for we did not like to tell him exactly you had gone out of his way; but it rather struck Pamela and me that for some little time past he went over somewhat often to Thorpe, and I believe the Deanery was the attraction, or at least one of the two young ladies there; in fact, Pamela said she was afraid he was beginning to admire Miss Carrie Elton."

"Oh! I hope not!" I exclaimed, with far different intent to that for which I immediately perceived Piers gave me credit.

He replied, "What perverse things you women can be when it suits you! You would have nothing to say to Percy Digby when he wanted

you, and now you are vexed at his thinking of Carrie Elton!"

"Yes—I am, Piers dear—but it is not on my own account."

"On whose, then?"

"On Claude's?"

"Oh! that's it, is it, poor lad! But, Marian," continued my brother, dropping his voice, and speaking very seriously. "I must warn you, that you may not build too many hopes on what may never come to pass, that there are still many chances *against* our hopes for Claude's return. Of course, whilst there's a straw left to cling to I shall exert every energy, and keep on hoping; but at the same time——"

Piers stopped there abruptly, for we were at the foot of the hill that led to our home, and the lights began already to glimmer in the distance, and Piers looked eagerly from the window, as if straining his eyes to see the forms of his wife and little children, who were already standing in the doorway to welcome him home. But my heart was very sad as I thought of what Piers

had said, and that we might never welcome poor Claude back to his old home. When I reflected on that, my anger rose against Flora, and I almost condemned Mr. Crofton for the uncompromising sternness which, in refusing to hear anything respecting his daughter after her elopement, had tended to produce this miserable result.

But I would not, could not, long indulge in that harsh turn of thought, for it is most true that there is no more unhappy state of mind than that of "being wroth with one we love."

"I shall forgive him readily enough when I see him again," thought I, as I pondered over our last most unsatisfactory meeting in London, hardly comprehending the drift of his parting words, and in what way they could refer to Claude, only hoping that as we *had* met, Mr. Crofton would have once more appeared amongst us again; but the hope grew fainter, and at last quite died out. And then it was whispered and rumoured about that Mr. Crofton was gone

abroad again, because his daughter and her husband had taken up their abode for two or three months in England.

The Duc D'Alembert was familiar with England and English society; and now that his marriage with Flora Crofton was openly proclaimed, he was desirous of the fact being thoroughly recognised in the best English society, before he introduced her into that of his own country. All the unpleasant stories of Flora's elopement with her father's young and handsome secretary, had then to be demolished and satisfactorily explained, as far as it was possible; and it was fortunate for Flora that her friend, Madame de Villeneuve, having been in her nephew's confidence, was able to speak to the fact that her marriage with the young Duc, although secret, had followed very quickly on the breaking off the match which had grown so distasteful to her feelings.

The prosperous young couple found the world very indulgent to them. Some of the great leaders in fashionable society who were

friends of the Duc took up Flora, and she soon made her way, and shone in London, as well as Parisian society, as a star of the first magnitude. But with all this success in public, it was rumoured that in private life the beautiful young duchesse was less happy, for her father would not overlook the offence of her flight and private marriage; and to prevent all importunity on the part of his daughter and her husband, he had taken his departure from England to some distant country—no one knew exactly in what part of the world—but it was decided his object in going was to avoid all chance of seeing his daughter and her husband.

The D'Alemberts were extremely popular, and people only shook their heads over Mr. Crofton's alleged implacability of conduct, and it was said no doubt the duchesse had reason enough for running away from such a stern father.

Of course there was a perfect storm of comment and conjecture in our immediate neighbourhood when it became fully known and un-

derstood, as it very quickly did, that Claude Markham had never ran away with Flora Crofton at all—that he was, in fact, as far as could be told, still a single and disengaged man—that he had been in different parts of the world endeavouring to push his own fortunes, with that love of enterprise so common to the young and energetic; and it was further understood that Mr. Markham, his brother at the Manor-house, was seriously uneasy at not having had any tidings from him for some time, and was diligently prosecuting such inquiries as, it was hoped, would result in soon bringing Claude Markham home to his friends. There was, of course, a mysterious corner in this history of his life into which the curious tried to pry, but could gain no satisfaction; so at last they were contented to drop all that perplexing part of his story, and look forward to some explanation when he should reappear on the scenes.

In our own family circle, where, of course, all attending circumstances had by degrees become fully known and thoroughly discussed, there

existed considerable difference of opinion regarding Claude's conduct. I was extremely vexed to find that his mother complained bitterly of the disregard she considered he had shown to herself and her feelings, whilst he allowed himself to be made such a perfect tool of by Flora, and that to save her feelings he had sacrificed those of his mother and family so entirely. She did not look at the subject from any particularly moral point of view, only as it acted in regard to herself. She made no allowance for the reckless generosity of youth, and the chivalrous devotion he had shown to his patron's daughter.

I was even more annoyed to find poor Claude was to be as hardly dealt with by some of the more youthful members of his own family. Juliet and her husband unsparingly condemned the whole proceeding. With cool, practical good sense, they stripped the poor youth's sacrifice of every particle of romantic merit, and denounced it as a criminal connivance at falsehood and wrong in others, and an

unworthy participation in the same on his own part.

“I have no patience with Claude,” said Juliet, in her old decided tone, “to let everybody think he had run away with Flora, whilst she was married to some one else privately! If I had not denounced her openly, as I am sure I should have done if I had been in his place, I should at all events have taken care to show I had nothing to do with her. As for Flora, I think so ill of her in every way, that I do not think I could speak to her if she ever comes down here again—first of all running after Claude to ask him to marry her, and then sacrificing him to marry some one else, he thinking he was bound to hold his tongue all that time, and give up everything for her!”

“I think poor Claude had not the least idea his silence was to last so long, nor had Flora either, at the time she exacted it. Things went on from month to month and year to year, quite contrary to their first expectations,” said I.

“I think, cousin, you forget,” said Luke, ele-

vating his voice and his chin in a peculiar manner when passing judgment, "that we are forbidden to do evil that good may come."

"What would you have done in Claude's place, then, Luke?" I asked.

"I should either have taken Miss Crofton back to her father, or have (failing to accomplish that) brought Mr. Crofton to his daughter," said Luke, with calm decision.

"Yes," said I, impatiently, "it is so easy to do the right thing oneself in imagination, and condemn others who think and act differently!"

Luke's only reply was,

"You asked a question, Cousin Marian, and I answered it to the best of my ability. Pray let us say no more on the subject."

I saw that Luke was really grieved to differ from me, and yet he would not and could not compromise his own ideas of right and wrong out of consideration for any earthly being. So by tacit consent we never alluded to the subject that so deeply engrossed the family thoughts at that time. It was my great comfort that

Piers, with all his apparent roughness, had far more indulgent tenderness towards his young brother than Luke. He and Pamela entered into all my views and feelings about Claude in the most satisfactory manner. Piers, who happened to be present when Luke declared what he would have done in Claude's place, was quite indignant, as he said,

“ What! betray a girl's confidence in that way? It is well she did not run away after you.”

Luke merely opened his eyes at the horror of such a supposition, but he did not think it needful to say more than he had done to me; and I knew Piers, though he approved of Claude, had not much toleration for Flora, so he said nothing about her.

There was another person who took a deep, but for the most part silent interest in our affairs just then, and that was Carrie Elton. I found her constantly at my step-mother's, whose near neighbourhood favoured their frequent meeting; and as the dear lady supposed all

these visits to be made out of individual regard to herself, she was highly gratified by Carrie's marked attention. It did not, however, I thought, augur well for my friend Mr. Digby's success in his suit, supposing him to be, as my brother imagined, an admirer of Miss Carrie Elton's.

We had met again, and were very good friends, and all the better that there did not appear to be the least intention on his part of renewing his former addresses to myself. I think both Piers and Pamela were disappointed on my account, but I was truly thankful that it was so. He came at intervals to the Manor-house, for Piers and he were as fast friends as ever; but I could always detect that our being in the neighbourhood of Thorpe was one of the pleasantest features of our locality. I often longed to question him concerning Carrie, but feared my motive might be misunderstood. On one occasion I ventured a little remark, something by way of a feeler, in that direction—or at least Mr. Digby seemed to consider it so,

and to put himself on his guard in a moment. It was an observation I made respecting Carrie Elton, whose praises I took the opportunity of rehearsing, supposing it would be an agreeable theme to my listener. He heard me very calmly, and as calmly replied,

“Yes, I daresay she is all you say, and you must be much better informed on that subject than I can be; but it strikes me that the other Miss Elton—Julia, I think her name is—is quite as pretty and as pleasant.”

I only replied, “Do you?” thinking, with a smile to myself, that I was not to be hoodwinked in that way.

Mr. Digby, having so much time at his disposal, elected to spend a good deal of it either with us or in our near neighbourhood; and it may be supposed that the coming amongst us of such an agreeable, clever, and good-looking man, made quite a little sensation in our quiet coterie, and added not a little to the pleasure of our various parties that summer.

“Everybody likes Digby so much,” said

Pamela to me one day, when we were preparing for a party, of which he was to make one, "I really cannot think, Marion, what can possess you not to care more for him. Piers, I know, would be so pleased if you could like him, I really wonder you don't—and so popular as he is here, and indeed everywhere where I have seen him. Come, Marion, suppose you begin to give him a little encouragement to-day."

"Too late! too late!" I replied laughing; "don't you see that, Pamela? Why, Piers is quicker-sighted than you in those matters; he first told me of Carrie Elton."

"Nonsense! you can soon distance Carrie Elton I know, if you choose to try."

"But I don't wish to try, dear; and I can tell you also it would be of no use now if I did, so please be content to keep me with you yet a little longer."

That was a clever ruse on my part—it had the effect of stopping all Pamela's fruitless wishes on my behalf, so she said no more about encouraging Mr. Percival. I remember that

conversation and that party so well, because it was the last we went to for a long time.

On our return home, Piers found a large packet, which had arrived from his London agent by the evening's train—in fact, we had brought it home from the station with us; and Piers immediately took it with him into his own room, to look over the various documents it contained, all relating to the inquiries he had instituted in the Mauritius, where Claude had last been heard of, and from other places, as had resulted from them.

How slowly the time seemed to pass as Pamela and I waited her husband's coming to us, after he had mustered the contents of that ominous-looking packet! I shall never forget the intense nervous feeling of apprehension that overwhelmed me in that awful interval. At first Pamela and I tried to talk over some of the events of the day; then we had some tea. But still the clock ticked on, marking the minutes and the hours as they went slowly round. At last Pamela said,

"Let us ring for the lamp, Marian—there is something so dreary in sitting here waiting all in the dark. I can't even see the clock now. Ring, dear."

"Not just yet, Pamela; he will be here in a few minutes now," said I, dreading the coming in of servants, and the glare of the lights—the dusky twilight suited my state of mind so much better.

At last we heard the study-door open. I started up from the sofa, where I had been sitting by my sister-in-law. As I did so, almost unconsciously I grasped her arm—

"Oh! Pamela, how happy you are never to have known Claude!"

"Don't say that, dear, for I hope to be very happy soon in knowing him."

"Never now!" with a sort of prophetic despair I could not account for.

Piers came in—his step was slow.

"How dark you all are here. Is that you, Marian?"

"Yes—tell me all."

"Well, sit down quietly, my poor girl. You must not give way. I fear there is nothing good to tell; or, in fact, any hope that I can see."

"Then Claude is dead?"

"As good, I fear."

I dropped upon the sofa, and Piers sat down by me, and in that dark hour tenderly related to his wife and me all the sad tale that his agents had communicated to him. It was briefly to the effect that following the direction supplied by his latest address sent to Madame Celestine, Claude Markham's after career had been easily traced, though a good deal of time had been taken up on account of the distance of the various places in which he had last been heard of. It appeared he had acted as supercargo to more than one trading vessel from South America, and afterwards from the Mauritius. The latest and saddest intelligence concerning him was, he went with a ship to the South African coast, and having delivered her freight, had stopped to collect ivory, and whilst

doing so, had gone up the country elephant-hunting. The natives in the interior were not very friendly, so the crew had orders not to go far inland. It appeared a party of them disregarded these orders, and the officer with them on that occasion was Claude Markham. The lamentable result was, that when the men got back to the vessel, several were missing, our poor Claude amongst them. The returned men said they had been surrounded, several killed, and they had escaped for their lives. One man distinctly stated he saw Mr. Markham down, and in the hands of a savage—his fate he considered sure. And so did Piers, and every one who heard this miserable history.

And so we mourned for Claude, so dearly loved, so early lost. It was, nevertheless, a strange mourning. We had already felt his loss so deeply, and lamented it in the days that were passed, till it seemed as if he had been dead to us then; after that, there came that short, bright interval of hope when Piers, following a little ray of partial light, had fondly

hoped to have been the means of bringing his brother home; and now that expectation was so miserably terminated, we again mourned for Claude in all the sad assurance of his sorrowful and untimely ending.

I need not dwell on that time—there are few who do not know, by wretched experience, the sad aching sensation of that yearning love which turns to the memory of those whose place is empty here, who once made the joy of that home which will see them no more. Happy, thrice happy are those “loyal hearts and true” who, realizing the blessedness of a future meeting in that far distant land where “love is never cold,” can still go on their weary way, rejoicing though the desire of their hearts be taken from them, the lights of their earthly hopes for ever quenched. I do not think my poor step-mother either mourned or rejoiced in that heavenly frame of mind. Still, after an interval of passionate grief, she began to look up again, and take comfort, and by degrees some interest, and even pleasure, in her various surroundings.

What a support did she find then in her good little doctor! How tenderly he nursed his "dear lady" in an illness, partly induced by her depressed state of spirits; and how patiently and cheerfully he bore with her fractiousness of mind resulting from impatience of grief and suffering! Till at last one day Juliet remarked,

"After all, I am quite satisfied now that mamma did the wisest thing in the world when she married Doctor Jones."

And no one who heard the observation was inclined to contradict it. The experiment had been most successful.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER that winter came and went, and then spring dawned again, bringing fresh hopes and gladness in its train. The great event—or rather events—of the early part of that new year, was the addition of a baby boy, both at the Manor-house and at the Parsonage, to the respective families there. It was with a strange thrill of something like pain I heard that both the little strangers were to receive the old family name of Claude.

I could hardly bear to think of another Claude Markham, in the place of him we had lost! But no doubt I should get used to it in time.

Towards the end of the summer it was settled that Percival Digby should pay his

friends in that neighbourhood a farewell visit, preparatory to his approaching departure for India. He had not been in the North for some months ; he had been spending a gay winter and spring amongst some of his relations, not forgetting his old friend, Lady Percival, who we heard retained all her former regard for him. We were expecting his arrival one beautiful May day, and Pamela and I stayed in to welcome him, whilst Piers was absent on some of his numerous avocations, as country gentleman and magistrate.

“ What a time it is since he has been here ! ” said Pamela.

“ Yes, and how many things have happened ! ” said I, thinking of my brother Claude.

“ Oh ! yes, this darling has made its appearance,” returned she, looking at her baby Claude upon her lap. “ Depend upon it, Percival Digby will have secured a wife by this time ; he said he must take one back to India on his return,” observed Pamela.

“ I think it is very likely he has,” said I, in answer.

Mr. Digby came as expected, and after a few days Pamela began to sound him as to his matrimonial views and intentions. He only laughed and said his fate was not decided at that time, but he hoped it would be before he left that part of the world. It was still his wish and intention to take back a wife, if he could persuade some one to venture with him in that relation.

“There, Marian!” said Pamela exultingly, after he had left the room. “There’s a constant man for you!”

“No, not for me, I think——”

“Yes—it is *you*, I am sure it is—so don’t be unkind and refuse him again. I shall be grieved to my heart to lose you; but in a few years he says he shall be able to leave India and live entirely in England. How pleasant for you, Marian!”

“How pleasant for Carrie Elton, you mean.”

We found, however, that we were both in the wrong—it was neither to me nor Carrie to whom Mr. Digby intended to propose.

Not many days after his conversation with Pamela, he came into the room where we were sitting together, and said he hoped we were prepared to congratulate him, for he had just proposed to, and been accepted by—Julia Elton! So after all, he was perfectly sincere when he praised her, in preference to her younger sister—and I was—mistaken.

There was great joy at the Deanery in consequence of this offer, and Julia's happy prospects, and we all went over to make an early visit of congratulation.

Julia was the most natural, straightforward girl, or rather woman, in the world, and she dilated on her happiness to Pamela and me without the least reserve, saying, speaking of Mr. Digby,

“I always liked him, from the very first moment I saw him; but I am sure he liked Carrie best at first—she is much prettier than me—but he soon saw she cared nothing about him; in fact,” lowering her voice, “I don't think she ever loved any one but poor Claude, and now

he is gone I feel quite sure she will never marry."

That was rather a sweeping conclusion for the bride-elect to come to respecting her sister. But there was no doubt poor Carrie had been deeply attached to my brother. Still, I thought the chances were in due time she would meet some one else whom she could love, marry, and be happy with. I thought she looked out of spirits at her sister's wedding, which we all attended. But that was but natural, seeing she and Julia had been everything to each other after their eldest sister had married and left them some two years before.

It was settled that Carrie was to return home with us after the wedding. It was supposed the change would cheer and comfort her on her sister's departure. I was glad when it was all over, and having made our adieux, we had carried Carrie off with us, and were fairly settled in the carriage for a quiet drive home in the cool of the summer evening. My own spirits had began to flag after the day's excite-

ment, and as I watched Carrie's sad face (no longer decked in smiles for her sister's joy) as she sat opposite to me, I hoped we should both feel and look a little brighter the next day. A passing thought (I little expected to see realised) stole across my mind that, as it is said to be always darkest before dawn in the world of nature, so in that of feeling the spirits sometimes sink to the lowest ebb just before some bright future unexpectedly dawns on our heart's clouded horizon. Thus I sat silent, speculating somewhat dreamily as to Carrie's future destinies in life, and pondering a little on my own.

Quietly we passed along through those well-known lanes, with the sweet-smelling honeysuckle hedges, and enjoying all the lavish profusion of delicious sights and sounds peculiar to a July evening in our beautiful country. I was almost sorry when my reverie was broken off, and we drew up before the Hall door.

"I believe I have been asleep," said Carrie, who I knew had only been indulging in waking

dreams, but thought it necessary to apologise for her silence all the way home.

"Take care that you are awake now, or you will catch your foot in that door-mat," said Piers laughing, as he handed her out; and she only smiled in reply, as she passed the rug in safety, and went on quickly to the drawing-room a little in advance of the rest of the party.

As she opened the door of that room, we were startled by a little shriek, and Piers exclaimed, as he walked quickly on—

"There, she *has* fallen in earnest! Come and help her—what is the matter?—who is it?—don't be frightened, Miss Elton; no one shall hurt you."

Pamela and I pressed on at these mysterious words, and to our intense astonishment saw the cause of Carrie's fright in two strangers, who were standing in the doorway, as if they were advancing to meet us, but had stopped on seeing her fall.

"Pray forgive me my intrusion; we had no

intention of alarming you all so much, only we could not rest till we had seen you. Did not you get our parcel of letters this morning?—we could not send sooner."

All this was spoken rapidly, in a well-remembered voice, that set every nerve thrilling with joyful recognition, as Mr. Crofton held out his hand first to Piers, and then to me, whilst his companion bent down over poor Carrie's prostrate form, but soon raised himself to turn and catch me in his arms. Carrie had seen and recognised him, but I was the only one of the family to whom (changed as it was) Claude's dear face was familiar.

"It was the last thing in the world we intended to do, producing such a sensation," said Mr. Crofton, in his usual voice and manner; "and I cannot imagine how our letters have failed to reach you."

"I have them in my hand," replied Piers; "but they came late, and as we were in wedding haste this morning, I kept the parcel till my return, never imagining how deeply interesting the contents might prove."

The joy, the inexplicable confusion of that strange meeting may easily be imagined when Carrie was restored, and Claude duly made known to his deeply sympathising relations; question upon question following in rapid succession, till the whole of the wondrous tale of search and rescue was fully narrated. It may all be imagined when every one had given Claude up, Keene Crofton, true to his intention, travelled on and never rested till he had found him (dead or alive) in the savage hands into which he had fallen. Who can express the gratitude we all felt to him, or the joy of that blessed reunion. But it was a happiness almost too deep for words, there was something very solemn in its intensity. All was, however, told, and fully understood that night before we parted, and then Claude knew how hard his brother Piers had worked, to effect the happy end his other and most untiring friend had at last so wonderfully achieved.

When Mr. Crofton left us, it was with a promise of joining the family party the next day at dinner.

"For indeed it would be very incomplete without you," said honest Piers, little dreaming of the deeper significance of the words he spoke; Claude was to accompany his friend back to the Hall, and the following morning was to be devoted to his mother and sister Juliet, but all were to assemble afterwards in the old home.

"But I must see you, Marian, before that," whispered Keene Crofton, as he held my hand in a long lingering clasp as we parted that night; then as I spoke not, he added, "You will take one of the old walks, Marian, will not you? I shall look for you to meet me."

"Where?"

"By the gate, where we parted, I will wait for you there."

And there it was that we *did* meet again, and renewed those vows at the same spot, where some five years ago they had been cancelled. And yet, as we walked quietly back to the house, I could hardly believe that things had ever been otherwise than as they then were, between Keene Crofton and me. I suppose it was

though he had returned my troth he had kept heart all that time the same. He stipulated for no reserve then, that same day he asked me of my brother, as my nearest and dearest relative. It may be supposed Piers was somewhat astonished when the unexpected demand was made, and from such an unlooked for quarter. However, he managed to give his consent with a very good grace, and every day's acquaintance with Mr. Crofton increased his satisfaction that it had been asked. Were I to name what I for a moment considered the only drawback to my happiness just then, I should recur to a certain day, not long before our marriage (which took place as soon as it conveniently could), when Keene told me he had decided on living at his other and larger place in the south. It was rather a blow to many a pleasant little vision I had indulged in of my life at the old Hall; but I found, as I listened, that the new plan was better than the old! In the first place, at Hurst Court we were to be near Mary Manwairing. I had never known before that her husband's place was in the near neighbour-

hood of the home where all her life had been spent, yet it was natural enough that it should have been, as the vicinity of the two places led to her first acquaintance with, and subsequent engagement to Sir Edward Manwairing. That was indeed one pleasant reason for our going to live there. Now she was a widow, so I thought it like Keene to propose doing so under these circumstances.

But there was yet another, and, I do believe, not less urgent reason. He wished to offer Claude the agency of the property he knew so well, and also to establish him in the house as his own residence.

"Then," said he, "when Claude wishes to settle in life, which, if I mistake not, will be the case before long, then he will have a home ready made to take his wife to."

"Ah!" said I in answer, "that sounds very nice, and it is most kind of you; but what will Mr. John Forest say to such an innovation of his rights?"

Keene laughed as he replied,

“ Well, I think he will submit without much grumbling, for two reasons : he knows he has no *right* to a permanent residence at the Hall ; and, for the second, I believe he was about to give it up of his own free will.”

As I looked surprised, Mr. Crofton told me Mr. John Forest was about to take a wife to himself, his mother having died (as I was aware) about six months before. He had come to the resolution of marrying the pretty daughter of the gardener at the Hall, and would be very glad to accept the offer of a good farm, with a nice house to take his bride to.

“ I am glad, then, there is no chance of he and Claude clashing again.”

“ None in the least. You may make yourself quite easy. John Forest, with all his roughness, has got an honest Yorkshire heart under all ; and now he has begun to appreciate Claude, and to feel something like remorse for his former ungenerous mistrust of him in various ways, I expect he will no longer be a thorn in his side, but a valuable assistant.”

And so it was. From that time forth John Forest became one of Claude's firmest adherents, and was of the utmost use to him in his vocation, serving under him with zeal and ability. Indeed, it seemed that, under the united influence of his new enjoyment of domestic happiness and enlarged experience, John Forest bid fair to become an amiable and estimable character.

It was not long before Claude and Carrie came to an understanding equally interesting by that time to both, and her long-tried devotion was rewarded at last by meeting a return of such tender and ardent affection as Claude could never have bestowed on Flora Crofton.

The course of their love ran very smooth at last; for everyone on both sides approved, and consented. When the happy event actually did take place, Claude found himself in a very fair position as regarded worldly position. Not only had he his agency and pleasant home to take his young wife to, but Piers had come forward with (what was in his circumstances) a

very liberal provision, both for his brother and his two sisters. And then it was that when my portion was, at Mr. Crofton's desire, passed over to my sister Juliet (thereby doubling her original one) that Claude's mother declared her intention of settling a handsome allowance on her son, and as her daughter was so well provided for, leaving him, with the little doctor's full approbation, all she possessed at her death.

When Claude's happiness and prosperity were thus so well secured, I felt for the first time that I could, from the bottom of my heart, forgive Flora ; and having come to that conclusion, began to experience some anxiety that her father should extend the same charitable feeling towards her, and all her past offences.

I could, however, gain but little insight for some time into the state of his sentiments towards her.

The first year of our married life was spent abroad. It was a delightful time, visiting all the places I most wished to see, and seeing them all under the happiest auspices in the world. It

was not till after our return home, and we were quite settled at Hurst Court, that I knew anything of what his intentions might be. Then it was that one beautiful summer morning, Keene came to me with a note in his hand, saying it was from his sister Mary, and she wished us particularly to go over and stay a short time with her.

There was a peculiar tone in Keene's voice as he said this, giving me the note at the same time to read. Then having done so, I looked up eagerly into his steadfast face, and said,

"And Mary says, I see, that Flora and her husband are with her, and they all long so to see us. Oh ! Keene, dearest, you will go, will not you ?"

He looked down with a kind smile, and answered simply,

"I will, if you wish it."

And the next day we went.

THE END

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